



Stranger Things: The Story of Mike and Eleven by TheJiffyLube6

Category: Stranger Things, 2016

Genre: Romance, Sci-Fi

Language: English

Characters: Eleven/Jane H., Mike W.

Pairings: Mike W./Eleven/Jane H.

Status: Completed

Published: 2017-12-28 21:07:05

Updated: 2018-01-19 21:43:57

Packaged: 2019-12-17 00:21:26

Rating: K +

Chapters: 9

Words: 52,815

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: A novelization of season 1 with the complete focus on the development of Mike and Eleven's relationship with scenes added or extended here and there to fill in the gaps. Fluffy Mileven feels.

1. Chapter 1: The Vanishing of Will Byers

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CHAPTER 1: THE VANISHING OF WILL BYERS

The light was blinding, so much so that Eleven came to a halt almost as soon as she exited the doors. Throwing her arms in front of her face in a vain attempt to block the brightness, she knew she didn't have time to stop. The bad men were still chasing her, and she had to get away.

Blinking rapidly, Eleven stumbled forward realizing the texture beneath her bare feet had changed. As she broke into a trot and her eyes adjusted, she saw that she was running on something green and itchy against the soles of her feet.

This must be grass, she thought to herself, surprised at how prickly it was, grass always looked so smooth and green in the books she had been given in the lab.

Thinking of the lab brought her back to the present and the need to get moving. Frantically, she glanced around, searching for a way out. She could hear the bad men with their guns behind her. She didn't want to but if they caught up to her then she'd have to hurt them. And she didn't want to hurt them even if they had hurt her.

Running as fast as she could, Eleven scanned the open space, looking for a break in the imposing fence that stood between her and freedom. Her eyes landed on a large metal pipe surrounded by rocks. It might be just big enough for her to slip through and the bad men definitely wouldn't be able to fit.

She practically dove for the metal tunnel, seeing light on the other side, ignoring the way her bare knees and shins scraped against the jagged rocks. It was a tight fit, but she was going to make it.

As soon as she thought she was free Eleven felt herself being pulled

backwards. Her heart pounded against her chest from the adrenaline running through her veins and her breath came in short gasps as she kicked frantically against the rough hand clamped around her ankle.

Despite her best efforts, Eleven could feel herself being pulled out of the metal tunnel and she reacted on pure instinct. She glared at the man and imagined him being blown backwards and that's exactly what happened. She watched as he was forced to release her as he was shoved backwards by an invisible force, a trickle of blood already tickling her upper lip.

Not wanting to waste the advantage she now had, Eleven snapped her attention ahead of her and she crawled as quickly as she could forwards through the tube. It was longer than she expected but the light at the end got brighter and brighter until she reached the opening, one word repeating in her mind on a loop,

Free.

Mike was pretty sure there was not one square inch on his entire body that wasn't completely soaked. He had no idea how long he, Dustin, and Lucas had actually been out here searching for Will because he was too worried about ruining his watch in the rain to look at it.

None of them had really anticipated how the cold November rain would feel as it pelted their exposed faces and hands, seeping into the openings in their jackets and soaking through their jeans.

Every time Mike thought he couldn't go any further, he thought of Will out here for a whole 24 hours, cold and alone, and then he told himself he could push a little further. But Dustin needed a little more convincing as a particularly intense bout of thunder rolled above them.

Despite the din of millions of rain drops hitting millions of leaves, Mike thought he heard movement ahead of them. Almost in unison, all three of them pointed their flashlights ahead, looking for the source of the noise but seeing nothing in the darkness. Was that something or was that just the rustling of leaves from the rain and

wind?

Mike's heart raced in anticipation... had they found Will? Were they about to get eaten by bear? Was it possible Mike Myers was going to kill them all? This did feel an awful lot like some of the horror films he had sneakily watched with the guys during sleepovers.

At the sound of a sharp snap of a twig breaking under foot close to their right their eyes shot in that direction. This time their flashlights landed on a person. Or rather a kid.

Heart still pounding in his ears, Mike's breathing momentarily halted before returning in erratic pants with the shock of actually finding something- someone- out here in this storm.

It took his brain more than a few seconds to comprehend that not only had they found a kid, but she was a girl. Her short, buzzed hair and the darkness made it hard to know right away. But as they all still had their flashlights pointed directly at her face, Mike was able to see her brown eyes, squinting against the harsh light. There was something else in them... fear. The girl seemed just as surprised to see them as they were to see her out here.

More information was flooding Mike's brain as they stood there, processing what their eyes were seeing. The girl also appeared to be wearing only a oversized, but thin, t-shirt, soaked through and providing very little, if any protection from the cold rain. Mike could see her shiver, frozen in place as they stared at her. He could only imagine how cold she must be if he was freezing in the protection of his thick, water-resistant rain jacket.

This thought snapped him out of his dumb-founded state. Whoever she was, she was scared and obviously not in any shape to be left out here alone.

First things, first, Mike realized they were all probably blinding her, so he quickly lowered his flashlight, using his free hand to push Dustin's down and nodding at Lucas to do the same.

The girl's chest was still rising and falling heavily, her breathing erratic and Mike could see she was terrified, so next was trying to

convince her they meant her no harm.

"Hey, are you okay? What are you doing out here in the rain? Are you lost?" he asked all at once, his teeth chattering, but trying to convey that they weren't going to hurt her.

He couldn't really tell but he thought she might be similar in age to them; she was only slightly shorter than him. He had so many questions running through his head: Who was she? Why was her head shaved? Why was she out in the rain with only a t-shirt on? How long had she been out here in the storm?

Those brown eyes just stared at him in the darkness. Undeterred, Mike knew there would be time for questions later, but they had to get this girl out of the storm or she would get really sick, or worse.

"Let's get you out of the rain, okay? You're gonna freeze out here," Mike told her, internally cringing at how much he sounded like his mom right then. He reached out to her and she flinched away, causing Mike to retreat almost as quickly. She really was terrified of them, but the storm was getting worse and they had to get her somewhere warm and dry, fast.

"Hey, it's okay. We're not gonna hurt you. You can come to my house and warm up, get something to eat and then we'll figure everything out later. Okay?" Mike needed her to know that they could be trusted, but he could practically feel, Dustin and Lucas' sideways looks at him.

"Mike, you can't bring a strange girl into your house," Lucas argued but Mike was already shrugging out of his coat. He didn't want to scare her even further, so he held the coat open for her, letting her decide whether to accept it or not. Thankfully, she decided it was worth the risk because she took a hesitant step forward and let him put it over her shoulders, watching them with wide, frightened eyes as she pulled it tightly around herself.

"All right, let's go," Mike gestured to where their bikes were sitting on the side of the road and he half-expected the girl not to follow, but she did, and Mike couldn't help but notice she was barefoot too. His brow furrowed in concern and confusion. Whoever this girl was she

had run away in a hurry if she didn't even have time to put on proper clothes or shoes.

If they wanted to get out of the rain fast, she was going to have to get on a bike with one of them. Judging by Dustin and Lucas' continued lack of support, Mike already knew she would be riding with him.

Picking up his bike, Mike swung his leg over, planting it firmly on the ground to steady its weight.

"Hop on. It'll be a lot quicker to ride to my house," he told her, the heavy downpour still muffling his words to the point he felt like he was practically yelling.

The girl still didn't say anything but looked at the bike as if she had never seen one before, full of apprehension. Maybe it would be easier if they walked.... His house was far but not that far away. Plus, he wasn't a hundred percent sure she spoke English or understood what he was saying to her as she hadn't responded to anything he'd said so far.

So, that's what they- really, Mike- decided. The boys picked up their bikes and began walking them quickly back up the road in the direction of the Wheeler's house, this strange girl walking alongside them. Mike found himself regularly glancing over at her, checking to make sure she was still there. He wasn't sure why he was so relieved every time his eyes fell on her petit frame, but he was.

As they sped through the rain, Mike couldn't help but wonder what the chances had been of finding another lost kid in Mirkwood while they were out there looking for their lost friend. But he supposed stranger things had happened.

A/N: So, this is the Season 1 novelization that no one asked for but was so, so much fun to write. This fic will focus solely on the development of Mike and Eleven's relationship episode to episode. Sometimes, as in this chapter, there will scenes from between episodes where I wanted to know how things progressed but wasn't in the show. This chapter is short, but this episode had the least amount of Mike/Eleven interaction, so

needless to say, all of the other chapters will be much longer. I have this whole story written up, so review and let me know if it's worth posting the whole thing!

2. Chapter 2: The Weirdo on Maple Street

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CHAPTER 2: THE WEIRDO ON MAPLE STREET

They had all made it safely to the Wheeler house and managed to sneak into the basement without Mike's parents realizing they had ever left and came back.

During the short, but frigid, sopping wet, walk, Mike had been watching the strange girl out of the corner of his eye. He couldn't help but notice her shivering in the cold despite the jacket that now hung limply on her shoulders. Every time a burst of lightning lit up the sky or a crescendo of thunder sounded, Mike could see the girl flinch. He had no idea what her deal was, but he picked up the pace, worried she'd either freeze to death out here or bolt from fear.

Once they were safely in the basement, Mike offered her the couch. It was already old and busted so a little rainwater wasn't going to hurt it. The girl took a seat hesitantly, her chest still heaving in short panicked breaths. Mike was the first to start, standing in front of her and asking abruptly,

"Is there a number we can call? For your parents?"

The light brown eyes snapped to his and in his own anxious state he couldn't decipher the emotions there. Confusion? Definitely. Fear? Absolutely. But whatever else she may be feeling was lost on him as Dustin asked his own questions, "Where's your hair? Do you have cancer?" his voice a mix of incredulosity and concern.

"Did you run away?" Lucas picked up from there, and Mike could sense his friends felt like this whole thing had been a bad idea. But he didn't care. Helping her was the right thing to do.

"Are you in some kind of trouble?" Mike wanted to know the source of her fear so he could help her. Everything about this situation felt

off. What would a girl their age, with a shaved head no less, be doing wandering out in the storm in Mirkwood, barefoot, in nothing but a baggy t-shirt?

"Is that blood?" Lucas asked, pointing at her face, his finger getting closer and closer to the girl who seemed to recoil as he neared her, something that wasn't unnoticed by Mike. His strong reaction surprised even himself though.

Almost instinctively Mike slapped Lucas' hand away from her and he yelled,

"Stop it! You're freaking her out!"

Immediately, his friend got defensive and put his hands out in front of him, gesturing towards her, with the sharp response of,

"She's freaking me out!"

"I bet she's deaf," Dustin interjected and turned to the girl, clapping his hands loudly in her face to which she flinched and recoiled even further into herself, and Dustin corrected quietly, "not deaf."

Mike could see the fear in her face but now it seemed to be in response to them. How could he blame her? They were asking her all kinds of questions and getting in her space when she was already scared, so he had to put a stop to this.

"All right, that's enough! She's just scared and cold," Mike chastised them firmly, watching as she looked at each of them in turn. Her eyes came to rest on him as he spoke, and it brought him to his senses. He had to get her warm. She was still in soaking clothes and his jacket offered little warmth now that it was drenched too.

He, shoved by Lucas a little in his rush over to the laundry basket of clean clothes and picked out the sweats he had been wearing Sunday during their D&D campaign. He figured they would fit because the girl seemed to be about his size, maybe slightly shorter.

On his way back to the couch, Mike couldn't help but notice the way she cringed at a particularly loud burst of thunder. Once he reached her again, he held out the clean clothes. "Here, these are clean.

Okay?"

He watched her carefully as she seemed to study the clothes, before taking them and pressing them to her face. Mike had no idea what to make of this girl, but he felt like he was beginning to gain her trust.

She shrugged his jacket off and stood. All of a sudden, she reached down for the hem of her large yellow shirt. Mike was pretty sure he, Dustin, and Lucas had never moved faster in their lives. In unison, Lucas and Dustin bolted away, "Ohmygod, ohmygod, ohmygod," Dustin was yelling while Lucas and Mike just kept repeating, "Nononononono."

Mike's instinct was to stop her, before she did something that embarrassed them all. Though she didn't seem embarrassed at all just confused and a little shaken by their sudden reactions. His heart had started beating so fast in anxiety that this girl was going to get naked in front of them that he hardly realized he had put his hands on hers.

"See over there? There's the bathroom. Privacy. Get it?" Mike explained to her, gesturing with one hand while the other hovered over hers in fear she would continue to try and take her clothes off in front of them again.

Her eyes were full of confusion and fear again and a stab of guilt shot through him. He hadn't really meant to have such a strong reaction, but it was just a fundamental rule not to get naked in front of a member of the opposite sex unless you were going to do...things, but she clearly hadn't gotten that memo. Where did she come from that she wouldn't even know that?

Mike continued to watch her anxiously, her eyes seeming to suggest that she was weighing her options and was just as perplexed by them as they were by her. Small rivulets of rain had collected all over her skin, skin that seemed naturally olive but also a shade paler than was natural, Mike noted.

After a moment, she picked the clothes back up from the couch and made her way over to the bathroom. Not entirely sure why, but Mike followed her maybe to make sure she didn't try to strip again, he told himself.

She stepped into the small room and glanced around as if she had never been in a bathroom before. Mike made to shut the door behind her when suddenly her hand shot out and stopped it. That panic had returned to her eyes, but this was different. This was some of kind of primal fear. The look of utter terror startled Mike and he made no move to close the door further.

"You don't want it closed?" he asked in surprise, studying her face, making a futile attempt to understand her reaction. Was she claustrophobic? That seemed like too simple of an explanation for a girl with such foreign mannerisms.

Her light brown eyes, looked away briefly, as if considering something before coming back up to Mike's.

"No," she said in almost a whisper, and again Mike was taken aback by this girl.

"Oh, so you can speak," he replied, more to himself than her before suggesting to her, "Okay, well, uhm. How about we keep the door just like this?"

She allowed him to slowly close it most of the way, but her hand stayed firmly on the door until she was certain Mike wasn't going to lock her in. Something about her reaction made Mike's heart ache. He didn't know much about people, after all, he was an outcast in his own school, but he knew that something had happened to this girl. Her wide, fearful eyes and serious expression revealed nothing and yet everything he needed to know. She was obviously scared of them and he felt compelled to make sure she knew that he wasn't going to hurt her in anyway.

She watched him intently as he closed the door until only a sliver of the room was visible, never looking away from him and he never looking away from her. Only then did she release her tight grip on the door, apparently trusting he would keep his word.

"Is that better?" Mike asked softly, wanting to make sure she felt safe.

"Yes." She replied simply.

While she only spoke two syllables it seemed to be a struggle for her to say even that much. Nevertheless, Mike felt like the fear in her eyes had ebbed somewhat, so he gave her a slight, comforting smile before he stepped away from the door and back to Dustin and Lucas to give her some space.

The clothes the dark-haired boy had given her were nice. They were warm and dry and smelled good, nothing like the crisp hospital gown she typically had to wear at the lab that always smelled of harsh chemicals.

Stepping out of the bathroom, which looked nothing like the bathrooms at the lab, her eyes fell on the three boys arguing with one another. Their voices were slightly raised, and she could tell they were talking about her.

After a few minutes, the boy with the darker skin noticed her and stopped talking immediately. She could see the apprehension in his eyes and could tell that he trusted her about as much as she trusted him at the moment. But she hadn't had much of a choice when they found her.

She had still been reeling from the bad people finding her at the place with the food. She had seen what the bad people were capable of before, but she hadn't anticipated that they would kill anyone who merely helped her. Watching that woman shoot the nice man, Eleven realized that they were worse people than even she thought.

After she had escaped, hurting more of the bad people in the process, she had found herself with nowhere to go again with the added fear that the bad people would harm someone else. Then water had begun falling from overhead paired with loud sounds like the sky was cracking open and bright flashes of light. From the limited books she was given when she was smaller, Eleven knew that this was a storm and she decided that she didn't like it. It sounded a lot like the bad men's guns.

The water was cold, nothing like the water of the bath, and Eleven knew that she was getting weaker the longer she was out in it. So, when these three boys had found her an internal battle had raged

within her. She was desperate to get out of the storm and they were obviously not bad people, but if the bad people did find her here with them she was putting their lives at risk. Eventually, the dark-haired boy's offer to go where he lived was something she couldn't pass up, but she swore to herself that she would leave as soon as she figured out where to go. The idea of this nice boy getting hurt because of her made her heart hurt.

So, now she was here, with the three boys staring at her. The one with dark skin and the one with curly hair and no teeth seemed to regard her fearfully, giving her a lot of space. The dark-haired boy on the other hand smiled at her and told her she could stay here for the night until they could figure out what to do in the morning.

Eleven watched as the boys put sheets over a couple of chairs, with a light, some blankets, and pillows underneath. When that was done, the two other boys said good byes to the dark-haired one and went up the stairs.

He gestured for her to sit inside, calling it a fort, which she complied with because he hadn't locked her in the bathroom so she knew he was trying to help her. The boy gathered something else before making his way back over to her and offering the fabric that was in his hands.

"Here you go. Here's my sleeping bag," he offered, his voice warm and calming. She could feel him watching her as she laid out the thing he called a sleeping bag in the fort for additional bedding.

"Hey, I never asked your name," he said it as if it were a question and Eleven debated pretending to ignore him, but he had been so nice to her, so she chose to respond in her own way.

Hesitantly, Eleven looked up at the boy before she raised her sleeve revealing her tattoo. His reaction startled her a bit because he was obviously shocked,

"Is that real?!"

The boy reached out to touch her arm, but her reflex was to recoil away from him. Her eyes snapped to his and she could see that her

response had surprised him, his dark brown eyes were wide. There were only two types of touching at the lab and that the kind that hurt her and the kind Papa used to make her hurt others.

"Sorry...", he apologized, his face turning into what looked like a nervous smile as he explained himself, "I've just never seen a kid with a tattoo before."

Her limited reactions with people outside of the lab had taught her that she wasn't normal. But he had said sorry to her... to her that wasn't normal, so she regarded him thoughtfully. This dark-haired boy seemed to have no intention of harming her, but she just couldn't force herself to relax.

"What's it mean? Eleven?" he asked, and after considering it for a moment she pointed to herself.

His eyes seemed to fill with something she couldn't figure out. It wasn't quite confusion and not really sadness either, but it definitely wasn't a happy look.

"That's your name?" he responded, that look staying on his face as she nodded. She watched as he seemed to consider something before he spoke again, "Eleven... okay, well, my name's Mike- short for Michael... maybe we can call you El- short for Eleven?"

Eleven liked his suggestion. She could tell he was trying to make her feel at ease and it was hard not to trust him even having only just met him. Nodding in agreement, she thought that Mike was nice. He wanted her to feel comfortable: he gave her somewhere to sleep, gave her his jacket and warm clothes, and had told the other boys that she should stay.

"Uhm... well, okay. Good night, El," he said to her, standing up. Her eyes followed his movements and a part of her wanted to ask him to stay. Instead she could only manage,

"Night, Mike."

He gave her one last small smile, before dropping the blanket over the front of the fort, hiding her. She listened and could hear him walk

away, turn off the light and run upstairs. When she was alone, Eleven laid down in the fort, over the blankets, ready to run at the first sign of danger.

The storm continued to rage outside, and it scared her, but it did nothing to distract her from her thoughts. She had run away from everything she knew... away from the lab, away from Papa. She had opened the gate and let the monster out and now she was free, even though it didn't feel like it. The bad people were chasing her, hurting people. The reason she had run away was she didn't want anyone else to get hurt and now she was putting this nice boy and his family in danger.

Eleven- El- could feel the full weight of what she had done now that she was in a somewhat safe place. Tears slid down her cheeks and her chin quivered as she thought about how her whole life was going to be different now. How long would Papa and the bad people look for her? How many more people would they hurt? Would they hurt Mike?

Her thoughts stayed with Mike well into the night until eventually the exhaustion from everything that had happened today finally claimed her and the world went dark.

First thing in the morning, Mike rushed to get dressed and make a couple extra Eggo's for El. He had hardly slept last night, his thoughts with the girl in his basement. Eventually he had fallen asleep and when he had awoke, he had been certain that something that incredible had to have been a dream. But the pile of wet clothes in his room told him a different story.

After his brief back and forth with Nancy he sped down to the basement, checking to make sure no one followed him. Luckily, the basement had kind of become his domain now, so his sisters and parents rarely came down here.

The sounds of radio static met his ears as he made his way down the steps and he knew that El was awake, so he lifted the blanket covering the fort. His eyes were met with the sight of the girl with the shaved head fiddling with the dials on his Supercomm. At Mike's

appearance, her eyes almost immediately snapped to his.

"Hey, you found my Supercomm," he said congenially, offering her what he hoped was a friendly smile as he continued, "Pretty cool, huh? I talk to my friends with it. Mostly Lucas 'cause he lives so close. Signals pretty weak."

The girl's face never changed from the stoic expression but Mike figured that was better than outright fear, so he'd take it for now.

Remembering the waffle in his coat pocket, Mike pulled out the Eggo and offered it to her, "I got you breakfast."

She took the food from his hand quickly and he felt a pang of guilt for not offering her some food sooner. Who knows how long she was out in Mirkwood without something to eat. He watched her take a large bite of it hungrily before he started to lay out his plan to her.

"So, listen. This is gonna sound weird, but I just need you to go up there, then go to the front door and ring the doorbell. My mom will answer, and you'll tell her you're lost and you need help, but whatever you do you can't tell her about last night or that you know me. Understand?" he explained, ending with a smile.

He really hoped she understood. He really wanted to help her, but he was just a kid and had no idea but to do with a lost girl who obviously hadn't lived in the real world. At least not this one. But he especially didn't want to get in trouble when all he had been trying to do was the right thing. Despite what Lucas had said last night, he didn't think she was crazy and he didn't think it would've been right to leave her in the storm even if she was.

Mike would never forget the complete and utter fear in those brown eyes as they stared back at him from the couch. So, whatever happened he knew he had done the right thing. Now it was just a matter of not getting in trouble and getting back to searching for Will.

"Really, it's no big deal. We'll just pretend to meet each other again. And my mom... she'll know who to call," Mike added when her silence had stretched on. He could tell she was listening intently to

him, but he wasn't a hundred percent sure she was getting his plan, which he thought was pretty good himself.

Her face was serious, and she stared at him unflinchingly before uttering her one syllable response, "No."

"No?" he repeated lamely, confused because she obviously understood what he was asking of her but was refusing. But why? Wouldn't she want to go home?

"No," she repeated, her expression revealing nothing about why.

"No... you don't want my mom to get help?"

Mike was really confused now, but he could sense something wasn't right. There was a reason this girl was out in the storm in nothing but a t-shirt, fear seemingly emanating from her every pore. There was a reason she didn't have a name and instead was merely a number, branded with it. And there was a reason her expression was the most serious, her eyes the most haunted he had ever seen on a kid.

El shook her head slightly and an icy chill went up his spine, realizing that something bad had happened to her, really bad.

"You're in trouble, aren't you?" Mike asked gently, his eyes unable to move away from her face, trying to read anything in her expression. She merely gave him a sideways glance and that told him he was right, so he pushed on,

"Who...who are you in trouble with?"

She looked away then, her face still a mask, but her eyes seemed to betray her. Mike could almost see the emotions swirling in the brown depths as she readied herself to respond.

"Bad," El replied in a voice barely above a whisper. That shiver had turned into a full-fledged feeling of ice being dumped over his head. Whatever was going on with El was much worse than he, Lucas, or Dustin could have imagined.

Hesitantly, he spoke,

"Bad...bad people?"

She turned her eyes back to him and he could tell that she was debating with herself about whether to keep answering his questions. But Mike wasn't about to stop now, especially after she nodded in affirmation to his guess.

Then, he had to know if his suspicions were true.

"They want to hurt you...the bad people?" Mike knew his voice had hardened slightly as he said those words, but he couldn't help it. Something about the idea of anyone hurting this girl had stirred an angry fire in his chest that melted the icy fear. She was just a kid... why would anyone want to hurt her? Were the bad people her own parents? If not, why wasn't anyone protecting her?

It seemed as though El had run out of words because her response to his question was merely to put her pointer and second fingers together to simulate a gun. She pressed it to her head, the fear returning to her eyes, but she never looked away from him, even as she moved her hand to point the imaginary gun at him. After she dropped her hand, she continued to look at him.

"Understand?" she spoke seriously, her eyes pleading with him to comprehend the danger.

It was the most syllables she had said at one time and rather than being happy about earning a little of her trust, all Mike felt shock.

Bad people... not just any bad people... but bad people with guns were after her.

"Michael! Where are you? We're going to be late. Let's go!" his mom shouted from the top of the basement steps. His eyes snapped in the direction of her voice, worried she might find El down here.

He still wasn't sure how he was going to help this girl, but he made a quick decision.

"All right, I'll be back, just stay here. Stay here," he told her in a rush. Pulling the blanket down over the fort again, Mike ran back up the stairs, his plan quickly forming.

As El sat in the fort, she seriously considered running again. She was refreshed after having something to eat and a warm place to sleep for the night, so what was stopping her from getting as far from this place and the bad people as she could?

She knew the answer, but she was trying to ignore it.

Somehow, this boy called Mike had guessed vaguely at the danger she was in, but she had revealed more than she intended.

Again, she weighed her options. It was easy to see that he was a good person and he had no intentions of hurting her. As a result, she had made the decision to trust him in the hopes he wouldn't tell his Mama, he called her Mom, that she was here. The last thing she wanted was for the bad people to shoot Mike and his mom like they had shot the nice man with the food. Which was another reason she was thinking about running. She had already been the reason people died, bad and good, and she didn't want Mike to get hurt. But being here was also the safest she had felt since she had left the lab... maybe ever.

So, when he told her to wait, she considered running only briefly before she eventually decided to stay and wait like he asked her to do.

She wasn't sure how much time had passed but, as promised, Mike appeared after opening her fort, relief flooding her. He started talking really fast about things she didn't really understand but words like, 'school' and 'class,' she picked out. He invited her to come up the stairs with him which she was hesitant to do at first, afraid his mom would be waiting for her at the top. But no one else was here.

This place was completely foreign to her. The texture of the floor was soft under her feet, nothing like the cold, hard floors of the lab. And the rooms had color on the walls and so many... things. Her eyes couldn't stop drinking in the unfamiliar surroundings, even as she heard Mike speaking to her.

"Want anything to drink? We've got OJ, skim milk... what else? We have...."

The boy seemed to have noticed that she had wandered into another room, but her attention was transfixed on the box with the glass on the front with metal poles on the top. She had seen similar ones at the lab but she had never been allowed to be this close to one.

"Oh, this is my living room. It's mostly for watching TV. Nice, right? It's a 22 inch. That's like ten times bigger than Dustin's," Mike explained, but her attention was already over on the pictures. She stepped up onto an elevated stone-like platform so she could take a better look.

She recognized the first one as Mike, but next to it there was a picture of a girl, older than her, with long brown hair and nice brown eyes. She couldn't help but envy that hair.

"Pretty," she said, mostly to herself, a quick smile curling her lips as she said it.

"I guess...", Mike didn't seem to agree with her, but she listened as he explained who the people were in the pictures, one by one, "That's my sister Nancy... and that's baby Holly, and those are my parents. What are your parents like? Do they live close?"

She continued to ignore him, partly because it was too difficult to explain and partly because she was caught up in seeing everything she could possibly see about this new world she had found herself in. Her eyes fell on a fat chair that was also impossibly soft like the floor.

"That's our La-Z-Boy. It's where my Dad sleeps. You can try it, if you want," Mike offered, and she glanced over at him this time at the mention of his Papa. She wondered if his Papa was anything like hers. Probably not since Mike was so nice.

"Yea, it's fun," he encouraged as she made her way around to the front of the chair, unsure of herself but curious. When she was seated Mike continued,

"Just trust me, okay?"

And she did. She couldn't explain why but something about his eyes told her that he wouldn't hurt her like the bad people. He had already

shown that he would do the things he said by coming back and he even chose not to tell his mom about her even though he wanted to.

So, she chose to trust him. Nodding her affirmation, El held her hands stiffly on the arms of the chair, anxious about what this chair would do. Her right hand was close to Mike's before he reached down and, all of sudden, the chair flung backwards, so now she was laying on her back, Mike's left hand above her head. It surprised her but in a good way and she couldn't stop the smile that crept onto her face or the little laugh that escaped her lips.

"See? Fun, right?" he asked, a wide grin on his face. Then, Mike pushed the chair back into the sitting position.

"Now you try," he suggested, and she wanted to. She reached down and pulled the bar that Mike had, her legs flinging out again and her head going backwards.

It gave her a fluttery feeling in her stomach, but she wasn't sure if that was from the chair or from the way Mike was smiling at her. She could see that her happy made him happy and that made her feel funny.

Mike spent the morning showing El around his house and eventually they had ended up in his room. He was showing her his Star Wars collection at the moment,

"Ready, are you? What knows you of ready?" he mimicked in his best Yoda impression. El didn't seem to get the reference, as with most things he realized, but that was okay. He didn't mind, he just liked being around her.

"His name's Yoda. He can use the force to move things with his mind. Like this- Whoosh!" he explained before shoving half the action figures off the table. He then moved on to something else, excited to show her everything, but she had already stood up.

"This is my dinosaur, Rory. Look, he has a speaker in his mouth, so he can roar," Mike continued, used to her exploring the house while he was explaining things. She seemed to have never been in a house

before which only added to his questions. But he knew she would tell him when she was ready, so he wouldn't push.

He noticed that she was standing in front of his trophies, leaning closer to get a better look. So, Mike dropped Rory back onto the table and came to stand beside her,

"Oh, these are all my science fair trophies. We got first every year, except for last year when we got third. Mr. Clarke said it was totally political," he explained, ending in exasperation over their loss.

He wasn't surprised by her silence, that was kind of her thing, but when his gaze fell on her face he was a little startled to see fear and recognition when her eyes fell on their science fair picture. She then lifted her hand slowly and pointed directly at Will's face in the photo. Mike's heart sped up to twice its normal rhythm. This couldn't be a coincidence.

"You know Will? Did you see him? Last night? On the road?" he asked her, trying not to be too aggressive with his questions but he needed to know. Will was missing, and he needed to know if she had seen him. How else would she know him?

The sound of a car pulling into the cul-de-sac startled them both and Mike ran to the window, hoping it was just a delivery man or something. But when he reached the window, he saw the all-too-familiar station wagon approaching and his heart sunk.

If his mom found El in the house, he would get in so much trouble. And after everything he had learned about El, Mike didn't think it was safe for his mom to get involved, at least not yet.

"We gotta go," he told her, grabbing her arm, something he wouldn't have done in any other circumstance, and pulling her down the stairs, but it was too late. They reached the landing and he screeched to a halt at the sight of his mother, Holly on her hip, stepping into the house. Thankfully, her back was to them, otherwise they'd be dead, so Mike took the opportunity to run them back upstairs.

"Ted? Is that you?" his mom yelled from the kitchen, but Mike didn't stop running towards his room.

"Just me, mom!" he yelled back as they reached the second floor.

"Mike? What are you doing home?"

"One second!"

They made it to his room and he released El so he could slam the door shut. His heart was racing and he was practically gasping for air but his head was thinking clearly. He had to hide her and quick so he went for the closet.

"In here. I'll be right back, okay?" he told her anxiously, but her face was full of apprehension and uncertainty.

"Please, you have to get in or my mom, she'll find you. Do you understand?" he said in a rush, afraid his mother would come up and find this strange girl in his room any minute. He could see she needed further reassurance, so he added, "I won't tell her about you. I promise."

"Promise?" confusion etched her features and the word rolled off her tongue as if it was from a completely foreign language.

"It means something that you can't break. Ever," he defined in the quickest way possible, but he could see the question still in her face. But there wasn't time to explain further because his mom's voice rang out once more,

"Michael!"

They both turned towards the sound of her voice before meeting each other's gaze. He refused to abuse whatever trust he had earned from her by forcing her to hide, even if he felt like it was in his and her best interests at the moment. He couldn't forget the way she had flinched away from him last night when he had reached out to touch the tattoo on her forearm. He wouldn't be another bad person for her to fear but he needed her hide, so he could keep her and his family safe. So, Mike tried the only thing left that he could think of and he practically begged, "Please?"

Her mahogany eyes seem to soften just a bit, but she still gave him an uncertain glance as she moved towards the closet. Relief flooded him

as she stepped into the enclosed space of her own volition.

El turned to face him as he was closing the door and guilt tore through him at the unmistakable terror in her eyes before he shut it completely.

Eleven trusted Mike, even after only knowing him for less than 24 hours. She could see the fear of being caught in his eyes, and she believed that he truly would keep her a secret from his mom. That was the only reason she stepped willingly into the small, dark enclosed space.

The second the door closed, and she was thrust into darkness Eleven's heart began to race, her breathing coming in shallow gasps. Panic was already setting in as she had a flashback to one of the many times her Papa had her placed into the 'bad girl room,' as he called it.

He would have the guards leave her in there for hours at a time, despite her sobs and endless screams. She would beg and plead even as they slammed the door in her face, leaving her to pound on the cold metal.

It was always so dark, so cold, so alone. Whatever warmth and tenderness Papa gave her for doing good at what he asked her to do was replaced with a feeling of complete isolation when she couldn't do as he asked.

Eleven crushed her eyelids closed as the emotions and memories overwhelmed her. This room wasn't nearly as dark or barren as the one she was forced into at the lab but that didn't stop the feeling that the walls were closing in around her. She felt as though she couldn't breathe, the memories so palpable they felt like they were going to suffocate her.

Tears were slipping down her cheeks as she leaned back against the back wall of the space. Unable to stand any longer, Eleven slid down, dropping hard onto the carpeted floor and hugging her knees to her chest protectively. It felt like an eternity as she sat there sobbing in the darkness. The soul crushing feeling of being alone swallowing her hole.

"Eleven? Is everything okay? El?"

Mike's voice drifted through the wood of the closet door and somehow reached her in the dark place. The next instant, the door swung open and the boy appeared.

He fell to his knees in front of her as she raised her tear-stained eyes to his dark ones. She could hardly believe he was there, staring at her with such concern.

Mike had come back for her, just like he promised. She had stopped crying but she could feel the wetness on her face, betraying her. For some reason, she didn't mind that Mike knew she had cried.

"Is everything okay?" his voice was soft and worried. She could see his eyes searching hers, trying to figure out what was the matter.

Disbelief still permeated her as she stared at him, but she nodded. She was telling the truth because she was okay, now that he had kept his promise. He hadn't put her in the closet to punish her... he truly wanted to protect her, and he had kept her a secret from his own mom

"Are you sure?" he pressed gently, not convinced. She didn't want to see his eyes worried like that, so she tried to smile to make him believe and repeated his word,

"Promise."

If someone had asked him to explain it, Mike would have been completely at a loss. Which is kind of what he was trying to do now with Lucas and Dustin.

After his mom had left, Mike had rushed up to find El in tears, huddled in his closet. When he had heard the thunk upstairs he had wanted to run up there right away to make sure she was all right, but he had to convince his mom no one was here and try to get her to leave as soon as possible. He felt bad for lying to his mom but it was to keep them all safe, so he figured it was right thing to do.

El had looked so...so broken, was the only word that came to mind.

Guilt ate at him as he realized his asking her to get in the closet had obviously triggered something from her past, probably having to do with the bad people.

His guilt had quickly turned to anger thinking about what those bastards must have done to her. That anger was short lived though, because then he knew that would only make her retreat further into herself. So, Mike collected himself and coaxed her out of the closet, her cheeks still damp with her previous tears.

The last thing he wanted to do was push her to tell him what was wrong, so he settled for making sure she was okay. She promised him that she was, but he wasn't blind. And while he was desperate to find out how she knew Will, it was more important that he made her feel better first.

So, the rest of the afternoon he spent taking care of her; making sure she had enough to eat, which was challenging because she seemed to scarf down whatever he gave her so quickly, as if she had never been fed properly in her life- maybe she hadn't. He also made sure she stayed in the safety and relative privacy of his room, just in case his mom or someone else decided to come home unannounced again. But he also tried to give her a little space, letting her take the lead, explore and look at whatever she wanted, explaining when she looked at him with silent questions. Because as curious as he was about her, he wanted her to feel safe more.

He knew Dustin and Lucas were probably worried he had been caught when he hadn't shown up at school, so Mike wasn't surprised when they showed up at his house after school. He was both excited and nervous when they stepped into his room. On one hand, he was anxious to find Will, but on the other he was sad his day alone with El was over. Not to mention, Mike knew he was about to get an earful from them once he explained everything.

As soon as Dustin closed his bedroom door all the way, Lucas ripped into him, practically yelling, "Are you out of your mind?"

And just as quickly, Mike became defensive, "Just listen to me."

"You are out of your mind."

"She knows about Will," Mike blurted before one of them cut him off again.

"What do you mean, she knows about Will?" Dustin piped in and Mike went over and grabbed their science fair picture, holding it up for them to see before explaining,

"She pointed at him- at his picture. She knew he was missing. I could tell."

"You could tell," Lucas scoffed, clearly not believing it.

"Just think about it. Do you really think it was a coincidence that we found her on *Mirkwood*, the same place where Will disappeared," Mike argued.

All the while he could see El out of the corner of his eye, sitting on his bed silently. The look on her face seemed to be trying to convey something he couldn't discern. But after spending the day with her he understood why she wouldn't- couldn't speak- after the untold horrors he was sure she experienced at the hands of the bad people.

"That is weird," Dustin conceded, glancing at Lucas beside him.

"And she said bad people are after her. I think maybe these bad people are the same ones who took Will. I think she knows what happened to him," Mike presented his theory, but Lucas' crossed arms seemed to suggest he wasn't buying what he was selling.

"Then why doesn't she tell us?" he countered. Without warning, Lucas crossed the room in several strides, angrily directing his next words to El, "Do you know where he is?"

Mike stood behind him, his own anger rising at his friend's aggressive tactics, but Lucas wasn't done.

"Do you know where Will is?!" he demanded, getting her face and grabbing her shoulders roughly. That was crossing a line and Mike had the overwhelming urge to protect her.

"Stop it! You're scaring her!" he yelled angrily at Lucas, and his so-called friend released her, turning on him now.

"She should be scared!" Lucas shouted in his face and Mike turned his eyes to El, trying to gauge her reaction as Lucas demanded to her, "If you know where he is, tell us."

He didn't grab her this time, but his voice was low and dangerous. It was causing conflicting emotions in Mike to see his best friend treat this girl so harshly. Fear had returned to those light brown eyes and El looked to be on the verge of tears again. Mike's heart hurt to see it.

Mike really wanted to find Will and he wished Eleven would tell them, but Lucas was going about this the wrong way. Mike was afraid that all the trust he had earned from her today would completely vanish as she retreated back into herself.

Thankfully, Lucas gave up on getting anything out of El, but then he turned his anger back on Mike again.

"This is nuts! We have to take her to your mom," he said forcefully, but Mike wasn't having it.

"No. Eleven said telling any adult would put us in danger."

El hadn't expressly said that but he had been able to glean that from the limited information she had given him this morning. She had only said a few words but somehow, he had completely understood what she meant, her expressive eyes, filled with fear, telling him everything he needed to know, as was becoming their norm already.

"What kind of danger?" Dustin asked quietly but the other two ignored him. Lucas looking at Mike as if he'd gone off the deep end, saying incredulously,

"Her *name* is *Eleven*?"

"El, for short," Mike explained, before Dustin cut in again, more insistently this time,

"Mike! What kind of danger?"

"Danger, danger," he replied in frustration. He couldn't exactly tell them what kind of danger, since Eleven hadn't so he used the method she had. Forming his fingers into the shape of a gun, Mike pointed it

at Dustin's forehead before turning it to Lucas.' But the latter wasn't having it. He slapped Mike's hand away hard and shouted,

"No, no, no! We're going back to Plan A. We're telling your mom!"

Mike did nothing to stop him but panic set in as he realized what Lucas was going to do would put them all at risk, most of all El. As Lucas opened his bedroom door, he opened his mouth to try to talk him out of it one more time, but words ended up not being necessary.

At that moment, the door slammed shut, pulled by an invisible force. Lucas stopped short in surprise, looking bewilderedly at the door before trying to open it again. Once more, he was able to open it about a foot before it slammed closed, this time locking them all inside.

Mike couldn't explain this either, but somehow, he just knew it was Eleven.

They all shifted their gaze to where she now stood, positioned in front his bed. Mike noticed a thin stream of blood dripping from her left nostril as she stared fiercely at Lucas, saying only one word,

"No."

Eleven had really hadn't wanted to use her powers. She knew it wasn't normal and would scare them, but she couldn't let the boy called Lucas tell Mike's mom. If he told her then she was afraid the bad people would find her and then Mike and his family would get hurt. She refused to let that happen, so she had locked the door.

After that they all looked at her differently. Mike too. It wasn't bad look, but it made her a little sad to know she had scared him a little.

After that they had tried to ask her so many questions, but Lucas didn't yell at her this time. It wasn't long before she heard Mike's mom shout for dinner. Mike told her she could stay in his room and he would bring her food afterwards. She believed him because he promised. She was still reluctant to let them out though in case Lucas decided to tell Mike's mom, but Mike said he wouldn't. And she

trusted Mike, so she let them unlock the door and leave the room.

After a while she was tired of waiting, so Eleven decided to go back down to what Mike called the basement. She wanted to see if she could get that Supercomm thing to work, so maybe she could hear Will. Mike called him, 'a friend,' which she still didn't know what that meant but she would ask him later because it seemed important.

Eventually, she heard the basement door open and three sets of feet descending the wooden stairs.

"El?" she heard Mike's voice call out to her. Glancing up from the Supercomm, she saw him, followed by the boy called Dustin and then Lucas. Mike approached her, carrying a tray in both hands and coming to kneel in front of her.

"No adults. Just us and some meatloaf," Mike told her reassuringly. She wasn't sure what meatloaf was, but it was food and that was all that mattered. Mike's eyes held no fear of her, even after he had seen what she could do, and she was relieved. But at the appearance of Lucas her eyes turned cold. He was looking at her just as apprehensively as she felt about him.

"Don't worry. They won't tell anyone about you. They promise," he told her and she believed him. His eyes were warm as he looked at her and she felt less lonely when he was around.

He turned back to the other two and prompted, "Right?"

The curly haired boy, smiled nervously at her as he spoke, "We never would have upset you if we knew you had superpowers."

All of sudden, Mike turned around and hit him in the leg. This elicited an, 'ow,' from Dustin but El could tell he hadn't really been hurt. Either way, it startled her to see Mike hurt him, so she leaned away slightly, back into the fort, her eyes fixed on all of them.

Those dark brown eyes turned back to hers, softening as he spoke to her, "What Dustin is trying to say is, is that they were just scared... earlier. That's all."

"We just wanted to find our friend," Lucas explained, his voice quieter

than earlier, but Eleven was still uneasy about him. He had grabbed her like the guards did at the lab and she didn't like it, but he used that word again and she had to ask,

"Friend?"

"Yeah, *friend*... Will...", Lucas responded with an airy tone but Eleven still didn't understand.

"What is friend?" El strung the words together because if she was going to understand why finding Will was so important to them she needed to know this word.

"Is she serious?" Lucas directed this to Dustin but El continued to stare him down, so he began to answer, "A friend is someone-."

But Mike cut him off, which she was kind of thankful for because he said things in a much nicer voice.

"Someone you'd do anything for," he interjected, and Dustin continued where he left off,

"You lend them your cool stuff, like comic books and trading cards."

"And they never break a promise," Mike added, and she understood that part.

"Especially when there's spit," Lucas piped in, confusing her again.

"Spit?" she asked. She knew what spit was but what did that have to do with a promise?

"A spit swear means-," Lucas began to explain as he spat into his hand and shook Dustin's, "You never break your word. It's a bond."

That was kind of gross. They would never let someone do that at the lab. Everything was so clean there.

"That's super important because friends, they tell each other things, things that parents don't know," Mike finished, looking at her with nice eyes. While she trusted him, she could tell that he wanted something from her. They were explaining all of this so she would

tell them where their friend was, but she didn't know if she could. She didn't feel like they were trying to use her or her powers like Papa did, but how could she help them find their friend when that meant revealing she was the reason he was gone?

But she would try to help them because Mike had helped her. His happy was starting to make her happy so she would try her best to explain where his friend was, even if it scared her.

Now that all that was out of the way, Mike was hoping El would be able and willing to help them find Will. As they huddled in a semi-circle, slightly apart from El so they could discuss their options Lucas looked back at El.

"What's the weirdo doing?" Lucas asked the two of them, and Mike had the overwhelming urge to punch him in the mouth. He was so condescending towards El still and downright mean. He had toned it down only slightly because he was probably afraid of her now.

Eleven had broken off from them and was sitting at their D&D table, staring down at the board. She had placed both hands flat on the table, and as Mike rounded in front of her he could see her eyes were closed in concentration.

They watched as all of sudden her chin jerked up and her eyes opened. She glanced back down at the board and slowly picked up Will the Wise's figure. As she held it closer to her face, the three of them were holding their breath as she whispered, "Will."

Staring at her in disbelief, Dustin said, "superpowers," to which Lucas shook his head. Mike ignored both of them, his pulse quickened at the sound of his friend's name. How had she known that was his piece? What kind of powers did she have exactly?

Slowly, as to not startle her, Mike slid into the chair beside her, never taking his eyes from her face. He spoke gently but urgently, "Did you see him? On Mirkwood? Do you know where he is?"

Light brown eyes met his briefly before she held her arm out and swept it across the board, knocking the other pieces to the floor. Mike

threw a meaningful glance at Lucas before his eyes snapped back to El.

She had now flipped over the board at this point and after a moment she picked back up Will the Wise and thrust him onto the middle of the board.

"I don't understand," Mike said, watching her raptly, knowing she was trying to tell him something important about where Will was.

"Hiding," was all she said, and he still couldn't get it, this must be how she felt every time he said something she had never heard before.

"Will is hiding?" he repeated her word to confirm. She nodded so he continued his guessing to try and figure out what she was trying to tell him, "From the bad men?" But she shook her head this time, so he asked, confused, "Then from who?"

Her expression serious, Eleven picked up the Demogorgon and placed it directly in front of Will's piece before turning her eyes to his. Mike's mind was reeling. D&D was just a game, right? She must be using the Demogorgon as a metaphor for something, but her eyes seemed to be telling him otherwise.

A/N: Wow! Thanks for the super positive feedback, you guys! I love seeing my inbox filled with such kind reviews for a fic I thought nobody would be interested in. As to the questions about Benny... I promise I did not forget him, I intentionally left out that scene last chapter because this fic will be Mike and Eleven focused. So, as you probably noticed I brought him up here as it pertained to Eleven's need to keep what happened to Benny from happening to Mike. There will be scenes here and there with Mike and Eleven apart but they will be the exception rather than the rule. Hope that makes sense. This chapter was incredibly long, but I'm trying to keep the chapter correlating with the episodes and a lot happened in episode 2 with Mike and Eleven. Anyways, as always, please let me know what you think! And thanks again for reading my little fic here!

3. Chapter 3: Holly, Jolly

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CHAPTER 3: HOLLY, JOLLY

Last night, El had tried to explain where their friend was, but she just didn't have the language to tell them. She was only just beginning to understand the dark place she had opened a gate to and trying to convey it to Mike and the others felt next to impossible. So, she had tried a visual, sensing which piece was attached to Will then having flipped their game board over and placing the monster next to him. If nothing else, she knew Mike understood the danger, and she secretly hoped that it would scare him away from pushing further. But he was a loyal friend and it only made them want to ask her more questions, questions she didn't know how to answer with words. So, she already determined that she needed to figure out how to find Will with the Supercomm to show them.

Frustrated, Dustin and Lucas had left while Mike stayed and helped her settle in for another night in the fort. His warm eyes assured her that there was no need to run, like she had planned to last night. So, after he said good night and left the basement, Eleven was able to sleep much easier, partly because there was no storm but mostly because Mike made her feel safe here in his home.

The next morning, Mike came down to the basement with Eggo's again but this time he was joined by Dustin and Lucas. The boys were busy talking about something, but Eleven's focus was solely on Mike's Supercomm. If she could just find the right frequency then maybe, just maybe she could communicate with their friend.

"We just tell our parents we have AV Club after school. That'll give us at least a couple of hours for Operation Mirkwood," she heard Mike say to Dustin and Lucas.

"You seriously think the weirdo knows where Will is?" this was from Lucas. He still didn't trust her and truthfully, she didn't really trust

him either. She didn't know what a weirdo was but it didn't sound nice and she looked up to see Mike frown slightly.

"Just trust me on this okay," Mike countered quickly, an edge to his voice.

She stopped listening and turned her attention back to the Supercomm, becoming increasingly frustrated with her lack of progress. Finding people in the bath was easy, but this was going to take some focus and more power if she could do it at all.

"-the Demogorgon isn't real! It's made up!" Lucas' exclamation caused her to look up at the boy as he held something she didn't recognize, "But if there is something out there I'm gonna shoot it in the eye and blind it."

She said nothing, but continued to listen to their conversation from her seat on the couch. Lucas didn't believe her, that she could deal with, but his belief that he could hurt the monster with that flimsy little weapon was silly and dangerous.

Again, Lucas' raised voice caught her attention.

"She shut one door!" he yelled at the curly haired boy. She couldn't help but glare at him. He had yelled at her, yelled at Mike, slapped Mike's hand, and even grabbed her like the bad people did at the lab. She was having a hard time understanding how someone like Mike was friends with Lucas but maybe she still wasn't fully understanding what it meant to be a friend.

"With her *mind*! Are you kidding me? That's insane!" Dustin countered, "Imagine all the other cool stuff she could do, like I bet she could make this fly."

Eleven had lost patience with the two boys who weren't Mike especially when Dustin came over and lifted the large toy Mike had showed her yesterday in front of her face.

"Hey," he said to get her attention, which she gave him against her better judgement, "okay, concentrate."

Then he let go of the toy and it fell to the floor with a crash. Staring

back at him, she knew what he wanted her to do, but she was a little preoccupied with trying to locate a wavelength to find their friend. Not to mention, she, and her powers, had been used by Papa and the bad men her entire life. She wasn't about to use them now for something so trivial. She was free now. She didn't have to use them if she didn't want to. Plus, Mike needed her help to find Will and she wasn't going to waste her power just because the curly haired boy wanted to prove a point.

"Okay. One more time. Use your powers, okay?" he said as he picked it up and did exactly the same thing. His tone was so condescending, as if she didn't understand what he was saying to her, which made her want to do it even less.

Mike swiftly stepped in after that, snatching the toy from the floor and away from Dustin so he wouldn't drop it again. She could see the anger in his eyes as he chastised him, "She's not a dog."

There was a little flutter in her chest at Mike defending her. She wanted more than anything to tell him that she appreciated everything he had done for her. But, a second later the sound of his mom's voice calling for them interrupted their interaction.

As the other two boys scrambled to grab their things, Mike knelt down in front of her, his kind eyes serious as he addressed her.

"Stay down here, don't make any noise, and don't leave," he told her, "If you get hungry eat Dustin's snacks, okay?"

He wasn't asking her, but it wasn't really an order either. Eleven could tell from his expression that he was telling her to stay hidden to protect her, to keep the bad men from finding her.

"Michael!" his mom's voice called again, and she was a little startled when Mike turned and yelled back loudly, "Coming!"

Those dark eyes turned back to hers, using a soft voice that she noticed he only had been using with her. It wasn't condescending like the way Dustin spoke to her and it wasn't harsh like Lucas'.

"You know those powerlines?" he asked her, staring at her intently, as

if he could use his own superpowers to help her understand, but she didn't.

"Powerlines?" she had to ask. She knew what power was and she knew lines but together she wasn't quite sure what he meant.

"Yeah, the ones behind my house?" he elaborated, and she understood that. They had snuck in through the yard behind his house the first night he brought her here.

"Yes," she confirmed.

"Meet us there after school," he told her, again it wasn't an order but more of a firm request.

"After school?" she didn't understand. She'd heard the word school a few times, but she only really felt comfortable enough to ask Mike because she knew he wouldn't make fun of her and call her weirdo like Lucas.

"Yeah, at 3:15," he said but her expression must have told him that she still didn't comprehend what he was asking of her. Her eyes followed his movements as he removed the watch from his wrist. He was giving it to her and it made her feel happy because she almost never got things. The watch was nothing like the shiny silver watch Papa wore but it was Mike's so she thought it was nice.

Mike then gently placed it around her wrist. It was a simple gesture but something about the way his fingers brushed against the skin on the inside of her wrist felt nice, like warmth spreading through her body from the top of her head to the tips of her toes.

"When the numbers read 3-1-5, meet us there," he explained, and she knew numbers. Relieved, she finally felt like she understood what he was asking her to do.

"3-1-5," she repeated, staring down at the watch. She noticed the numbers read 7-4-8 at the moment. She'd have to watch them carefully to make sure she didn't miss 3-1-5.

"3-1-5," he confirmed, and she still hadn't figured out a way to thank him for his kindness yet, so for now, all she could do was give him a

smile before he rushed up the stairs.

The school day had felt like it had dragged on forever. All Mike wanted to do was rush home to El..., so they could search for Will, of course. Or at least that's what he kept telling himself.

But there was definitely something about her that seemed to draw him in; maybe it was that she was easily the most interesting person he had ever met, or maybe it was the way she seemed to say everything with a look. Mike had never been good at talking to anyone, much less girls, so up until now he was really only comfortable with his three friends. And then El had come into his life and made him re-evaluate everything. It sounded crazy, but he felt like he didn't need to speak for them to have a conversation.

Lucas and Dustin seemed to have noticed this too. As they rode back to his house after school, Mike thought back to recess while they were looking for rocks that would make for good ammo for the Wrist Rocket.

Lucas couldn't help but point it out. Dustin was more interested in comparing El to superheroes, which was nice, but Mike got the suspicion that he didn't fully see her as a girl, a regular human girl, who felt things like fear. But Lucas' reaction had outright pissed him off.

"She's not a superhero. She's a weirdo," he had argued, and Mike felt the need to defend her. He was tired of Lucas calling her that. Why was he being so cruel when it was so obvious that El was in trouble and needed their help as much as they needed hers?

So, he shot back, "What does that matter? The X-Men were weirdos."

"If you love her so much why don't you marry her?" Lucas taunted.

Mike could feel his cheeks flushing in embarrassment, but he tried to play it cool, asking exasperatedly, "What're you talking about?"

"Mike...seriously?"

"What?"

"You look at her all like....," Lucas began, holding his hands to his heart as he mocked in high-pitched voice, "Hi El, El, El, I love you so much! Would you marry me?" Lucas brought him in for a fake hug before dropping to his knees to mimic a proposal.

"Shut up, Lucas," he pushed Lucas away in annoyance. Mike didn't even try to deny it. Love and marriage was a little strong for someone he just met less than 48 hours ago, but Lucas was just being a jerk because Mike treated El like a human being. And so, what? Maybe he did like El, that didn't give Lucas the right to be an asshole about it.

Troy and James had showed up right after that, so Mike hadn't really had a whole lot of time to confront Lucas about it further which was fine by him. They continued biking and cut through a few other yards to get to his backyard.

Mike had told her to stay down in the basement, but he hadn't asked her to promise. She needed to find something other than this Supercomm to help her find Will, and the only way to do that was to go up the stairs. She had a feeling that the box Mike had called a TV yesterday may be able to do what she needed.

She had no idea how long she spent in the basement, but it felt like a long time. She really wanted to do as Mike asked, but she had eaten all of the snacks, as he called them, and had explored much of what was down there already. Even for her own entertainment, she had made the big grey toy fly like Dustin had asked her to this morning. She knew she could do it, but she wanted to do it for herself not for him.

Bored and frustrated, Eleven finally made the decision to go upstairs. She looked around, remembering the things Mike had shown her yesterday. She saw what he called the Lazy Boy and sat, flipping it back a few times, but it wasn't as fun without Mike smiling and laughing beside her.

But then she spotted something next to the chair on a little table. She picked up part of it, and held it close to her face. It was attached to the other piece by a curly wire and the sound it made was low and she mimicked it's sound. This probably wouldn't work to find Will.

The sound wasn't right.

Then, she went to the TV and pressed the buttons on it. The front lit up with sound and color. She couldn't look away from the bright moving images. Clicking on another button, the images changing, then another until a familiar image appeared: a red can with white, loopy writing on it.

Immediately, Eleven was thrust back into the lab. Breathing became difficult and her heart pounded painfully against her ribcage as the memories flooded her mind, making her forget where she was for a moment.

Eleven was crushing the can. Papa was making her crush that can with her gifts, as he called them. She did it and he was happy, but it didn't make her happy. Why did Papa want her to do this? She guessed it was harmless. But something felt wrong in the way Papa looked at her after that.

The lab melted away from around her after who knows how long, Eleven aware of gasping for air and the way it suddenly felt very warm in here. But she could see she was in Mike's house. Mike. Nice Mike, safe Mike.

I'm free, Eleven kept reminding herself, and she shut the TV off as quickly as she could in fear the lab would return in again.

She wished Mike was here. His eyes would make everything okay. But he had to go to school, so Eleven closed her eyes and imagined Mike's face: dark wavy hair, falling over his forehead, warm brown eyes, and nice smile.

Her breathing eventually returned to normal and her pulse slowed to a more appropriate rhythm. So, she allowed her eyes to slide open and quickly stepped away from the TV.

After that experience, Eleven was nervous to wander around the rest of the house, but curiosity got the better of her. She walked up the stairs, the soft floor feeling nice on her feet, and went to a door that Mike hadn't opened yesterday when he was showing her around.

This space was pink and nothing like Mike's. Her eyes were immediately drawn to a box on a shelf. She opened it and the tinkling of music startled her. Mike had also told her not to make any noise, so she shut it quickly. But no one was here and she hadn't promised so she opened it once more, listening to the pretty music and watching the little lady inside spin around.

It made her heart hurt to look at this pretty box because all it did was remind her that her life wasn't normal. Girls with names like Eleven don't get to be pretty or have pretty things.

Turning away, her eyes caught pictures on the opposite wall. She recognized Mike's sister, Nancy, from the pictures downstairs but there was someone else in some of the pictures. Eleven's heart sunk... this other girl... she could sense she was gone like Will too. But more gone. She didn't know how she knew but she could sense it, just like she had with Will. But what were the chances they were both in the Upside Down?

Looking down at the watch, Eleven panicked. The numbers read 3-1-0. She ran quickly back down to the basement and pulled on the shoes Mike had offered to let her borrow, he called them sneakers, and another one of his coats. *'Because you'll get sick if you don't wear one,'* Mike had insisted.

Eleven stepped out the back door and walked through the grass to the big pole with what looked like lines on it. This must be the powerlines Mike had talked about. There was a fence there too and it looked a lot like the one around the lab.

The thought of the lab made her anxious again. She really needed Mike. It didn't feel safe out here without him around. She paced back and forth, looking at Mike's watch, the numbers read 3-1-4. As if it would make her feel better and make him appear faster, she repeated over and over, "3-1-5, 3-1-5."

A hissing sound made Eleven's eyes snap to the fence once more. There, on the other side, was a cat. She was slipping again, slipping back into the lab. Her eyes went wide, and her body felt like it was being crushed again by the weight of the painful memory that was threatening to overtake her. She fought it as best she could, but she

was paralyzed with fear and it consumed her.

This was why Papa wanted her to crush the can... it was practice. Practice so she could crush this cat. She wanted Papa to be happy with her so badly because if he wasn't he'd have the guards punish her. He told her over and over it was 'just a cat,' but she could feel her pain even as she inflicted it. The can had no feelings, this was different. This wasn't right.

Glancing up at Papa through the bars of the cat's cage, Eleven begged him with her eyes to not make her do this. But his displeased frown and hard, cold eyes stared back at her. She knew she would be hurt if she didn't do this. So, she focused again, even as it tore at her soul, even as the cat hissed at her in her pain. But she couldn't do it. Or she could and that's what made it feel worse.

Tears threatened to spill down her face as she pulled the monitor off her head, looking up at Papa and shaking her head firmly. She could do this, but she wouldn't. It was wrong. The cat didn't deserve it.

And as expected, Papa had the guards yank her up from her seat and drag her, kicking and screaming, down the hall as he watched. She struggled and screamed for him, but it seemed to fall on deaf ears as the men threw her into the dark room. But this time was different. She knew she was right and they were wrong. So, Eleven stood up quickly and spun to look at them, her chin tucking in slightly as she focused her glare on them. She shoved the one guard back into the wall, feeling his spine snap and it crushed against the wall, and then the other approached her with the zapper and she snapped his neck with a jerk of her head.

Almost instantly she could feel the effects. She was exhausted, so weak she could no longer stand, so she slid to the floor just as Papa reappeared. But this time he was happy. She knew that wasn't right either. Her heart hurt... she had just killed those men. They had been trying to hurt her but she had ended their lives and that wasn't right either. But Papa was pleased she had killed them because he had wanted her to kill the cat but this was better.

And that's when she knew...she had to escape. Or Papa would make her keep hurting people until she had no heart left.

The sight of El standing next to the fence caused Mike breathe a sigh of relief. When he had told her to meet them he hadn't been entirely sure she understood what he was asking but he had hoped. And sure enough, here she was but as he strode towards her with his bike, Dustin and Lucas trailing behind him, Mike could sense something was wrong.

El stood stiffly, staring at the fence, her face blank but her eyes full of something he couldn't determine, they looked haunted.

"El?" he called out to her, and she turned to face him, the look not quite leaving her eyes, "You okay?"

She nodded but he could tell she wasn't. They didn't have much time to search for Will so he didn't push it, for now. But he made a mental note to ask her later.

"Hop on," he told her, patting the seat of his bike, "we only have a few hours."

Hesitating for only a second, El stepped down the hill and he held the bike steady so she could get on. Then, he swung his leg over and sat in front of her, unable to ignore the weird fluttering in his stomach as she gripped his shoulders tightly.

They biked for a while before they reached the part of Mirkwood that was too rocky to ride safely. So, they all dismounted, Mike again holding the bike steady so El didn't fall as she stepped off.

Mike walked next to El while Dustin and Lucas trailed behind. Lucas' earlier teasing of him about Eleven in the back of his mind. It wasn't enough to keep him from staying close to her though, but he told himself it was because he was the only one she seemed to trust, so he needed to be there for her, no matter what Lucas said. Plus, he liked being near her, so what?

"Why did they hurt you?" her soft voice drifted to his ears, pulling him from his thoughts.

El had remained mostly silent as she led them wherever Will was hiding, and Mike had never heard her make a full sentence, so it took

him a little off guard.

"What?" he said lamely, turning his gaze to her.

In response, El pointed her finger close to his chin. Taking one hand off his bike temporarily, Mike lifted his hand to it, feeling the slight scrape there. He hadn't realized his run in with Troy had made such a noticeable mark. He averted his gaze from her, ashamed of how easily he had been tripped by the bully; he really should have expected him to stick his foot out like that. Now El probably thought he was so lame and weak that he couldn't even defend himself.

"Oh, that... uh, I just fell... at recess," he lied, embarrassed that she had noticed the wound. If she knew just how lame he was compared to other kids then maybe she wouldn't want to be around him anymore. It was a total irrational thought but he it didn't seem irrational at the time.

"Mike...", she said, drawing his eyes back to her light brown ones briefly. He averted his gaze again because those eyes seemed to be looking right through him. Sometimes, being able to understand one another so well seemed like a disadvantage, at least right now it did.

"Yeah?" he replied, not glancing up. He was thankful that he had to focus on walking his bike otherwise he'd get lost in her eyes, especially the way he could feel her looking at him now.

"Friends tell the truth," she reminded him in that quiet voice of hers, and he mentally kicked himself for teaching her that. He knew he had to come clean now.

"I was tripped by this mouthbreather, Troy, okay?" he admitted with a sigh but still not daring to look her in the eye quite yet.

"Mouthbreather?" she repeated, unfamiliar with his slang apparently.

"Yeah, you know, a dumb person, a knucklehead," he explained, not aware he was just using different words she didn't understand.

"Knucklehead?" the word sounded completely foreign coming from her lips, but he figured she got the gist of it so he let that one go.

"I don't know why I just didn't tell you... everyone at school knows.... I just didn't want you to think I was such a wastoid, you know," Mike spoke dejectedly, feeling bad he lied to her but also for being the scrawny, nerdy kid he was. Why would someone awesome and powerful like her want to hang around someone like him?

"Mike," she spoke again, pulling him out his pity party.

"Yeah?" he acknowledged, prompting her to continue.

"I understand," she told him emphatically, her already gentle voice, even softer. This time Mike met her gaze and held it for as long as he dared.

"Oh, okay. Cool," he tried to sound offhand but inside it felt as though his heart would beat out of his chest. Even the little interaction they'd had over the last two days he felt as if she truly did understand him and he was beginning to understand her.

"Cool," she repeated. He continued to study her face even as she smiled at him and looked away. There was something about those rare smiles that made him feel as though he was the only one in the world to her. He couldn't help his own small smile that curled his lips as they walked on.

It was well after nightfall when Eleven strode up to the house where Will was hiding in the bad place. They had walked very far to get here and as the three boys walked their bikes up, she turned to Mike.

"Here," she said with certainty. And she was, because she could feel him here. But as she watched Mike's face she could tell he was doubtful.

"Yeah, this is where Will lives," he said slowly, glancing sideways at the house. She could tell that he was skeptical, so she needed to help him understand. Finding the right words were challenging because she hadn't had a lot of people to talk to at the lab other than Papa but she would try her best.

"Hiding," she explained. He was here, she knew it, but she was also

aware the boys would probably not be able to feel Will here the way she could. She had hoped her showing them with their game and the pieces that Will was here but in the Upside Down but they still didn't seem to understand what she was trying to tell them.

"No, no. This is where he lives. He's missing from here. Understand?" Mike said exasperatedly, clearly thinking that she was confused, but she wasn't. Her words were failing her again and she wished he could see into her mind, everything was there but she couldn't seem to convey it. She tried to tell him with her eyes, pleaded with him to understand but it was no use.

"What're we doing here?" Lucas asked with a mean tone, not really addressing his question to her but more to her interpreter, Mike.

"She said he's hiding here," the dark-haired boy explained but Eleven could feel the anger rising in the other two boys.

"Uhm, No," Lucas refused to believe it.

"I swear if we walked all the way out here for nothing....," Dustin began, leaving the threat hanging.

"That's exactly what we did! I told you she didn't know what the hell she was talking about!" Lucas yelled at Mike and she felt bad he was being blamed for her inability to explain things better. She didn't like the way Lucas was treating Mike, but she silently begged him to understand. She needed Mike to understand her. He was the only one of the three that believed her and trusted her from the beginning.

But even his frustration was growing as he turned to her looking for an explanation, "Why did you bring us here?"

She opened her mouth to answer but Lucas never gave her the opportunity to even try.

"Mike, don't waste your time with her," he said, already having decided that she was lying. But wasn't she a friend? Couldn't they see that she would not lie to her friends?

"What do you want to do then?" Mike raised his voice, clearly annoyed, and Lucas replied with just as much aggravation.

"Call the cops, like we should have done yesterday."

"We are not calling the cops," Mike told him firmly and Eleven wished she could tell him exactly how much she appreciated him for standing up for her time and again. But she remained silent, nervously watching they boys' tense interaction.

"Guys," Dustin's voice was lost in their arguing.

"What other choice do we have?" Lucas argued, and Mike began to respond when Dustin's shout cut them both off.

"Guys!"

They all turned at the sound of the loud blaring of sirens. A moment later several vehicles went by and Mike breathed,

"Will."

In unison, they ran for the bikes and pedaled after the sirens, Eleven clinging to Mike as tightly as she could, her feet slipping off the pegs a few times when he went over a few bigger bumps. She knew it wasn't Will because she could still feel his presence here, but those lights and sounds obviously meant bad things just like in the lab. She just hoped it wasn't the monster. She didn't think it was because she couldn't sense it's presence either, but if it was then she'd protect Mike...at any cost.

Mike had no idea he could pedal that fast, especially with Eleven behind him. But he did. They all screeched to a halt behind a fire truck, practically tossing their bikes to the ground in their rush to get a glimpse of what was going on.

As they hid behind the truck, Mike's heart was racing and his breathing was ragged from the physical exertion and the anticipation of seeing what all the sirens were about.

He didn't have to wait long though.

In utter disbelief he watched as the emergency workers lifted a kid-size body into a floating gurney. It was dark but then a flood light

swept over and showed them the body...

The kid was Will's size... had Will's hair... even had Will's clothes.

"It's not Will. It can't be," Mike refused to acknowledge what his eyes were seeing. But they continued bringing the body closer to the shore and then lifted it out of the water and now they were close enough to see clearly.

"It's Will...It's really Will," Lucas' voice was nothing like it had been just moments ago when he was angry and shouting, now he just sounded completely distraught.

One of their best friends... was dead.

He couldn't look anymore. Mike's chest was constricting painfully and it was getting harder to breath against the crushing weight. Will had just been at his house not even three days ago. The last thing he talked about was when he came clean right before leaving his house and rolling a '7' during their stupid campaign. A campaign they would never finish. Because Will was gone. Dead.

His thoughts continued to race, that word making him feel nauseous.

"Mike," Eleven's voice and the feeling of her gentle hand on his arm tore him from his thoughts. He was emotionally stripped bare and hurt, so he lashed out at her.

In his anger, he slapped her hand away roughly. He knew he hadn't hurt her, he would never actually physically hurt her, but the look she gave him told him he had done much worse. But it was too late now, his anger was spilling over and she was the closest and easiest target for it.

"Mike?! Mike what?! You were supposed to help us find him alive! You said he was alive! Why did you lie to us? What's wrong with you? What is wrong with you?" he yelled at her and the hurt in her eyes at his harsh words was making him feel even worse which only made him angrier. He didn't need guilt on top of the grief twisting his heart into pieces.

"Mike," she repeated his name just above a whisper, wounded and on

the verge of tears.

"What?!" he growled back at her, challenging her to defend herself but she said nothing. Unable to meet those broken eyes any longer because he knew she could see his own brokenness reflected back, Mike stomped away quickly, pain ripping apart his insides. He felt like such a fool. El had made him hope that Will was okay and he had trusted her.

"Mike, come on. Don't do this, man," Lucas begged him, tears in his voice, but Mike didn't turn back. He couldn't.

"Mike, where are you going? Mike?" Dustin called to him, but he didn't stop for him either.

Picking up his bike, and turning it around, Mike walked it quickly away from all of them. But something stopped him. Maybe it was his own guilt, maybe it was the sound of Eleven's tears, whatever it was he paused at the edge of the trail.

He was in agony. But he wasn't heartless, even if he wished he was in his grief. Being without a heart sounded pretty good right about now.

"Let's go," his voice was hard as he tried to hold back his tears. And he waited, standing stiffly. A moment later he felt Eleven's presence behind him, hesitating. He remained silent, unable to speak even if he wanted to, and she eventually slipped her leg over the bike and he did the same, numb and just going through the motions at this point. He refused to look at her or acknowledge the feeling of her arms around him as he pedaled towards his house.

A/N: Your reviews are making me so happy! I'm so glad you guys are enjoying this story. This chapter was much shorter than the last one, and that's even with me beefing it up with some Eleven and Mike solo scenes from the show that I felt were important to include to further show their growing feelings for one another. I hope you all like it! Also, there were some questions about whether I'd continue past Season 1, to which I say, there's a very good chance that'll happen. Maybe even beyond into my own Post-Season 2 story. Please, continued to review and let me

know how I'm doing!

4. Chapter 4: The Body

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CHAPTER 4: THE BODY

This was the worse pain she had ever felt. Her chest was constricting, the weight making it difficult for her lungs to expand and her heart felt like it was being crushed.

Eleven wasn't sure if it was because of her powers or because she seemed to be more attuned to Mike's feelings. Either way, she could feel his pain so acutely that it was making her own heart twist in agony.

When she got back into her fort, Eleven had curled up and cried, knowing Mike was upstairs crying too. She could feel it. From her limited time outside the lab, Eleven was only certain of one thing in this new world: she never wanted Mike to hurt.

His harshness earlier had surprised her at first. His raised voice and cold eyes made it feel as though she had been stabbed in the gut. She'd be lying if she said she wasn't hurt by the way he had shoved her hand away; not in the ouch kind of way but in the heart hurt kind of way. He didn't believe her that Will was hiding and that was what upset her the most because friends don't lie and she thought they were friends. Why couldn't he see that she was telling the truth?

She understood now though. He was mad at her because he was hurt. He thought she had hurt him on purpose by lying about their friend being alive. She knew all too well the anger that came out of pain. After all, she had killed two guards who tried to lock her in the small room because she was angry and scared. Her heart would always be missing a piece since she had killed people, but Mike's heart was still whole so he could still feel everything.

Even she couldn't explain how their friend's body had ended up in the water, but she knew it wasn't really him. She could feel that too. But

how could she show Mike that?

So, she promised herself she would find a way to listen to him with the Supercomm. Whereas she had been fiddling with it before, she was now determined to get it to work. She had to. Or Mike's pain would continue unnecessarily.

She had been surprised to say the least when Mike had come down to the basement later that evening. He didn't say anything to her, but he wordlessly made his way over to the couch, holding some pieces of paper she couldn't see. She didn't ask but continued to give him space and focused on tuning the radio.

"Can you please stop that?" Mike snapped at her sharply, so she stopped for a moment, not wanting to upset him further. She watched him return to looking at the paper, but then she thought about how happy he would be if he could hear Will that she flicked it back on a second later.

"Are you deaf?" he asked angrily but she didn't look up, staring determinedly down at the Supercomm, but his raised voice drew her attention back to him, "I thought we were friends, you know, but friends tell each other the truth."

Eleven could see the pain still fresh in his dark eyes, so she had look away because it made her heart hurt again to see him hurt. She wished more than anything in that moment that she could take away that pain, that she could find the words to tell him everything. She was telling the truth, but he didn't know that and she couldn't really blame him after the events of the night. Mike wasn't done speaking though.

"And they definitely don't lie to each other. You made me think Will was still out there, that he was still alive, but he wasn't, he wasn't," Mike added in an accusatory voice, tainted with his pain.

Eleven met his gaze and opened her mouth to speak but nothing came out. Maybe he could see in her eyes that she hadn't lied at all. But in his anger Mike looked away from her and he couldn't seem to understand her the way he had before. Or maybe he was done trying.

"Maybe you thought you were helping but you weren't. You hurt me," he continued, his voice a shade softer before rising again, "Do you understand? What you did sucks. Lucas was right about you... all along."

Her heart ached, but she stared at him unflinchingly. She could take it. He obviously needed to say these things and if it made him feel better then she would listen. Even if he was wrong, even if it hurt her too. If she could've just somehow conveyed better where Will was, or better yet, if she had never opened the Gate then Mike wouldn't have gotten hurt. But to hear that he thought that Lucas was right... that she was a weirdo... that felt like a punch to the gut.

More determined than ever to win back Mike's trust and heal his pain, Eleven focused every ounce of power she could into that Supercomm.

A second later, a young boy's voice sang weakly through the speakers, "...you gotta let me know.... *Should I stay or should I go? Should I stay or should I go now?*"

Mike's dark eyes snapped towards the sound and she watched his reaction hopefully, blood dripping from her nose. His eyes widened in shock and he rushed forward, kneeling down in front of her as she held the Supercomm out to him like a peace offering.

"Should I stay or should I go now? If I go there will be trouble, if I stay there will be double."

Mike took the Supercomm and broke the connection, speaking into it as if that was how it worked. Reaching into the Upside Down to reach him had taken a lot out of her, but she tried to hide it from the boy in front of her, anxious to see if he would believe her now.

"Will, is that you? It's Mike! Do you copy? Over," his words came in a rush and she watched him.

Did he believe her now? Had she done good? Whenever she used her powers in the lab it was because Papa demanded her to or risk being put in the dark room or zapped by the guards. But this was the first time she had wanted to use her powers to help someone. And she so

desperately wanted to help Mike, to make him see that his friend was still alive and that she hadn't meant to hurt him.

"Will, are you there? Will?" Mike continued, after waiting for a response, and she closed her eyes momentarily in relief- Mike would finally believe her and his pain would end. Seemingly, realizing that Will wouldn't be able to respond, Mike lowered the Supercomm and met her gaze. Apparently, he was the one having difficulty finding words now, but his voice was soft again, "Was that... Was it...?"

So, she finished for him as he had done for her countless times,

"Will."

He wasn't sure what had compelled him to go to the basement last night, but Mike was glad he did. His heart felt like it had been torn from his chest. El had made him believe that Will was alive, but he was dead. Yet, as hurt and angry as he was, Mike couldn't help the feeling that El hadn't actually lied. Maybe she truly believed that Will was alive, but it had gotten his hopes up, so to see Will's dead body had crushed him. Not only was one of his best friends dead, but it was a slap in the face that the girl he defended time and again, had betrayed him.

So, after he had cried in his mother's arms like a baby, Mike had gone to his room and was getting ready for bed, just going through the motions. Something was drawing him to the basement though. He convinced himself it was to go be near where he and Will spent most of their time, but El was down there too.

He had been a real asshole to her, no doubt about that, both earlier when they thought they saw Will's body and while she was playing with the Supercomm. After hearing her channel Will somehow, Mike almost immediately felt shame and guilt course through him.

He shouldn't have yelled at El anyway, but she had been telling the truth after all, which made him feel exponentially worse.

Now, he stared at her in utter disbelief, holding the Supercomm limply in his hand, Will's voice long gone. But there had been no

mistaking it. Will's voice was unmistakable, singing that song he liked.

Chocolate brown eyes stared back at him, hope shining in them, making Mike's heart clench painfully in his chest. She shouldn't be looking at him like that. She had been telling the truth all along. He was the one who had been a total jerk. He didn't deserve to be near her at all after the way he treated her.

"El...", he said her name quietly, ashamed. All his previous anger was gone, just like that. When he had heard Will's voice it just evaporated into thin air, along with the feeling of hurt and betrayal. All that was left was paralyzing guilt.

El just continued to look at him, her brow furrowed slightly, and he had to look away from those piercing eyes if he was going to be able to apologize. Somehow, he found the courage to keep speaking, "I am so sorry. I shouldn't have yelled at you like that. I was wrong and I was being a total mouth breather. I should have believed you. I should-."

"Mike," El's gentle voice cut him off more quickly than if she had shouted. He met her gaze, as she spoke again, "I understand."

She had said those exact same words to him earlier and it made his chest swell with happiness. He could feel the smile curl his lips as he watched hers do the same.

After all the shitty things he had said to her, after accusing her of lying when all she was trying to do was help them find someone she had never met, El had still forgiven him. Mike knew that meant something coming from a girl who had been through whatever hell she had.

Mike finally noticed how close their faces had come as his eyes fell to the blood on her upper lip.

Needing space and a moment to think, Mike jumped up from his spot on the floor, breaking their eye contact. He went into the bathroom and grabbed some tissues before making his way back over to her. Once again, he knelt in front of her, looking at her shyly and

gesturing to her nose.

"Is it okay if I-uh- can I get that?" he stuttered, nervously. Her brow furrowed again in confusion, but she nodded slightly. Mike reached up and tenderly held the tissue to her nose, soaking up the blood there. He could feel her eyes watching him as he did this, but she didn't flinch away like before when he had tried to touch her tattoo. He glanced up to her eyes briefly, just long enough for his heart to double its rhythm and his cheeks to flush.

He lifted the tissue away, giving it one final dab to clean whatever blood was left. He balled it up in his hand and chanced another glance at her, feeling the need to say one more thing.

"Thanks, El... for trying to help us find Will. I promise I'll believe you from now on," he told her firmly and she smiled one of those rare smiles again. There was fluttering in his stomach and he was pretty sure his whole face was a nice shade of red at this point.

He smiled back at her before standing up, and making to pull the sheets down over the fort, "Night, El."

"Night, Mike," she replied, and Mike watched as she laid back on his sleeping bag. And something in him wanted to stay down here with her. He knew he couldn't, his mom would come down here looking for him if he wasn't in his room. But El seemed to be like a magnet, holding him there, until he finally was able to lower the sheets and make his way up the stairs.

Sleep came easily to Eleven that night for the first time in a long time. It seemed like each day she spent at Mike's house she felt safer and more relaxed. The fact that she had used her powers also helped her sleep since it had drained her and made her even more tired. But it was also the peace of mind, knowing Mike wasn't mad at her anymore. He promised to believe her and that made her heart happy.

In the morning, she heard his tell-tale foot falls on the wooden stairs and she sat up immediately, excited to see Mike. He lifted the sheets with an excited smile on his face and it made her stomach feel funny. Good funny.

"Hey, El," he greeted her brightly, "Did you sleep okay?"

She nodded but also spoke, "Yes."

He smiled at her and handed her his usual Eggo's before he sat down next to her as she ate them. She could sense that his mood had turned serious again, but she waited for him to speak.

"Do you- Do you think you could do that again?" Mike asked her hesitantly, and she glanced sideways at him, not sure she was understanding what he was asking. Mike seemed to sense this, so he elaborated, "Could you find Will again and show Dustin and Lucas what you showed me last night?"

His voice was so hopeful. She could tell he really wanted her to do this but also he seemed like he didn't really like asking her to do it. But she was happy to try again so Lucas and Dustin would believe him and her, especially if it made Mike happy. So, she nodded in agreement and his bright smile returned.

Somehow, Mike had convinced Lucas to bring Dustin over, all of them staying home from school, so he could have El show them what she had shown him last night. Now they sat in a semi-circle around El in front of her fort as she used her powers on the Supercomm.

Sure enough, they heard the sound of Will whimpering where ever he was. There was no disputing it, or so Mike thought.

"We keep losing the signal, but you heard it, right?" Mike could barely contain his excitement as he looked at the other two, trying to gauge their reactions.

"Yeah... I heard a baby," Lucas said with his usual skepticism.

"What?"

"Mike, you obviously tapped into a baby monitor. It's probably the Blackburn's next door," was Lucas' rational explanation which only increased Mike's frustration.

"Uh, did that sound like a baby to you? That was Will," Mike insisted.

This must have been how El felt last night when no one believed her, something he still felt guilty about.

He had been so cruel to her, and he had been wrong. She hadn't lied at all. After apologizing profusely to her, Mike swore to himself that he wouldn't react that way again. After everything she had been through El didn't deserve to be treated the way he had treated her last night.

"Mike," Lucas began but Mike cut him off quickly.

"Lucas, you don't understand. He spoke last night... words, singing that weird song he loves... even El heard him," Mike persisted, undeterred.

"Oh, well, if the weirdo heard him then-," Lucas sarcastically mocked El and Mike opened his mouth to tell him to stop calling her that when Dustin cut in,

"Are you sure you're on the right channel?"

"I don't think it's about that. I think somehow *she's* channeling *him*," Mike explained his theory, watching as El stared down at the Supercomm in her lap. He could feel Lucas' skeptical sideways glance.

"Like Professor X," Dustin said in dawning understanding, a smile curling his lips, but Lucas would have none of it.

"You actually believe this crap?"

"I don't know... I mean, do you remember when Will fell off his bike and broke his arm? It sounded a lot like that," Dustin contended, and Mike knew he was finally getting somewhere.

"Did you guys not see what I saw?" Lucas asked incredulously, glancing between them, "They pulled Will's body out of the water. He's dead!"

El looked up at this. Mike could tell she didn't like Lucas' yelling but she said nothing.

"Well, maybe it's his ghost, maybe he's haunting us," Dustin tried

diplomatically.

"It's not his ghost," Mike insisted again, but Lucas challenged him immediately.

"How do you know that?"

"I just do!"

"Then what was in that water?"

"I don't know!" Mike was emphatic. "All I know is Will is alive! Will is alive! He's out there somewhere. All we have to do is find him," he asserted, and he could see from Lucas' defeated look that he had planted the seed of doubt in him. Sure, they all wanted to believe that Will was alive, but Mike just knew it and he needed them to know it too.

"This isn't gonna work. We're gonna need to get El to a stronger radio," he told them after listening to El tune it for days, he just knew that it was not going to be enough. After all, the Supercomm was barely powerful enough to reach Lucas' house next door much less wherever Will was hiding.

"Mr. Clarke's Heathkit Hamshack," Dustin offered, and Mike agreed whole-heartedly. That's exactly what he had been thinking.

"The Heathkit's at school. There's no way we are going to get the weirdo in there without anyone noticing," Lucas reminded them, ever the pessimist, before gesturing towards El, "I mean, look at her."

Mike did look at her, really looked at her. Sure, El didn't look like all the other girls he knew, but all the other girls he knew didn't have superpowers or were being chased by bad men, or had been through whatever horrors she had. But she was still pretty, with her buzzcut, in his sweat pants and sweat shirt.

El glanced up, apparently feeling their stares. Her chocolate brown eyes were confused, and Mike wanted to slap Lucas again for calling her a weirdo and making her feel like she wasn't one of them because to Mike she was a member of the party and maybe even more.

Eleven didn't completely understand why they needed to change her appearance to go to their school. Was this a place where you needed to look different? Mike hadn't changed his appearance to go to school. She didn't ask because she trusted Mike and he said it would help her stay hidden from the bad men, so they wouldn't recognize her, then she would do it.

When Mike guided her to sit down in front of him and he grabbed a box full of strange tubes and brushes, Eleven was even more confused. Again, she trusted Mike, so even though she was a little taken aback when he brushed some kind of powder on her cheeks she backed away instinctively, because it kind of tickled, but then leaned in when Mike gestured for her to so he could continue.

Then he had taken a tube of some kind and brushed it along her lips. She wanted to ask a hundred questions, but she was distracted by the feeling of Mike's face being this close to hers. Her eyes stayed fixed on his as he worked, his brow creased in concentration. It made her stomach get a fluttery feeling as if she had swallowed a dozen butterflies whole and they were flying around in there.

After last night, Eleven had been so worried Mike wouldn't want to be near her anymore. Which is why she tried so hard to show him that she hadn't been lying since she wasn't able to find the words. She was so relieved he was looking at her like that again and more importantly that he believed her.

She was slightly disappointed when Mike said he was finished and Dustin handed her a dress and hair to put over hers. Since she had learned you had to change in privacy Eleven went into the bathroom. Even though these clothes were foreign to her and it took her a little while to figure it out, she somehow managed to do it after Mike called through the door several times, asking if she was okay.

Finally, she stepped out to the awaiting boys. Mike was facing away from her at first but at the sound of the door opening behind him, he turned and Eleven could see his dark eyes widen slightly, his mouth hanging open as he gazed at her. At first, she thought maybe she had messed up and put the clothes on wrong.

"Wow, she looks....," Dustin began, his words trailing off as he looked

at her appreciatively, but Mike was the one to finish the sentence for him.

"Pretty," his voice soft and his eyes were honest.

Even though Eleven knew the other two boys were in the room, it felt as though it was just her and Mike. She looked only at him and his dark eyes were fixed on hers. She felt those butterflies again and she couldn't stop the slight smile that curled her lips. The butterflies only seemed to come around when Mike looked at her like that.

"Good... you look pretty good," he edited, trying to sound offhand. She could sense that he had remembered Lucas and Dustin were there and she watched his demeanor change.

She walked past them to the large mirror in the hallway and Mike followed her, watching her in the reflection. It was odd seeing herself with long hair... Papa had made sure it was cropped short for as long as she could remember. He said it made the machines work better any time she asked. But maybe now that she was free she could have hair?

"Pretty.... Good," she understood these as two separate things. How could someone look like they were good? But she liked the way she looked, and Mike made her feel good. She wished she could feel this way all the time.

The quickest way to get to school was through town, so El hopped on the back of Mike's bike as was becoming their ritual and they rode off. He could feel El's weight adjusting behind him and could sense she was looking around at everything she could. Her hands were gripping his shoulders tightly, but he didn't mind, quite the opposite actually.

They made it to the school and parked their bikes out front, Mike holding his steady as was becoming his norm so El could dismount. His eyes watched her as she stared wide eyed at her surroundings and he felt a little sad. She hadn't said it, but he just knew that the bad men never let her go anywhere, why else would such simple things in the world leave her in awe? It made his heart ache, but he was happy

she was getting to finally experience things and he could be there with her when she did.

They made their way into the school, glancing around to see if there was anyone around. So far so good.

"Okay, remember, if anyone sees us, look sad," Mike told them. They strode purposefully to the AV Club room, the principal reminding everyone over the intercom about the assembly for Will.

"It's locked," he said with exasperation as he tried the handle. Couldn't one thing go smoothly?

"What?" Lucas said as he tried the door himself. He never was one to believe anything he didn't observe firsthand.

"Do you think you can open it? With your powers?" Dustin suggested to El but she never had a chance to respond because someone came around the corner that instant.

"Boys."

It was Mr. Clarke.

They all snapped to attention, looking as innocent as possible.

"Assembly's about to start," he reminded, looking at each of them suspiciously. They had to throw him off.

"We know... we're just... you know," Mike did his best to look distraught and he thought he didn't do too shabby but then the others had to open their mouths, starting with Lucas' lame addition,

"Upset."

"Definitely, upset," Dustin added. Mike mentally rolled his eyes, these two would never be actors.

"We just need some alone time," Mike said sorrowfully but again Dustin had to ruin it.

"To cry."

"Listen, I get it. I do. I know how hard this is, but let's just be there for Will, huh?" Mr. Clarke said sympathetically, and Mike could see Dustin nod solemnly, "and then," Mr. Clarke dug around in his pocket and tossing Mike's the keys," the Heathkit is all yours for the rest of the day. What do you say?"

That had worked out way better than even Mike had hoped. So well, in fact, that he felt a little guilty for lying to Mr. Clarke since he was being so cool about this.

But then, unexpectedly he shifted his gaze and addressed El, "Hey, I don't believe we've met. What's your name?"

Panic set in and it froze all of them. Left to her own devices, El began to tell him the truth, "Eleven."

"Eleanor!" Mike practically shouted, not quite fast enough, "she's my...uh...." *Girlfriend*, is what he wanted to say, but he scrambled to think of literally anything else. He was drawing a complete blank which left the door open for Lucas and Dustin to screw things up.

"Cousin," Lucas inserted.

"Second-cousin," Dustin amended quickly, making Mike internally cringe. The thought of being related to El made him a little nauseous.

"She's here for Will's funeral," Mike explained, gathering himself slightly and wishing this interaction would be over soon.

"Ah, well. Welcome to Hawkins Middle, Eleanor. I wish you were here under better circumstances," Mr. Clarke said to her with a compassionate voice. Mike could see El didn't know quite how to respond and she looked to him for a moment before replying quietly,

"Thank you."

"Where are you from exactly?" Mr. Clarke asked, his eyes narrowed as if trying to place her accent. Mike's heart was sinking the longer this went on. How many lies would it take to end this?

Again, El was perpetually honest and spoke before they could intervene.

"Bad place," she said seriously, shaking her head slightly. Panic was back as they tried to recover.

"Sweden," Dustin supplied, and Mike ran with it.

"I have a lot of Swedish family."

"She hates it there," Dustin dead-panned.

"Cold," Lucas piped in.

"Sub-zero," Dustin always went a little too far, but it seemed to confuse Mr. Clarke into silence temporarily.

"Shall we?" he asked, and they quickly agreed, heading towards the gym.

Eleven had been nervous when they first walked into what they called the gymnasium because every person in the room had been staring at them. But as she sat next to Mike and everyone's attention went back to the man speaking in the middle of the room, she began to relax a little.

She had never seen this many children in one place before. They were all here for what Mike called school. It was so interesting. She made a mental note to ask Mike all about it later.

Sensing the dark-haired boy next to her tense up, Eleven looked at him to see him staring at someone further down. She leaned forward to see who it was and she just knew from Mike's reaction and their mean laughter...

"Mouth breather," she whispered to Mike and he slowly turned to glance back at her. She could see the confusion in his dark eyes, but she knew she was right. This boy who was laughing about Will's supposed death was the same one that hurt Mike. She could still see the scrape on Mike's chin, anger rising in her chest as she thought about anyone causing Mike pain. For now, she sat back, her mind thinking of all the ways she could hurt them for hurting Mike.

When the man stopped talking, almost in unison everyone stood and

scattered throughout the gym, exiting through various doors. Eleven kept her eyes on Mike, feeling the anger rolling off of him in waves. She wasn't sure what he was going to do but she followed him, making sure he was okay.

"Hey! Hey! Troy! Hey, Troy!" Mike yelled at the mouth breather as he was walking away. He seemed to have finally heard Mike because he turned around with the other mean boy, "You- you think this is funny?"

"What'd you say, Wheeler?" he challenged Mike and Eleven bristled. He wasn't allowed to speak to Mike in that voice.

"I- I saw you guys laughing over there, and I think that's a real messed up thing to do," Mike stumbled on his words at first in his rage, but his voice hardened as he spoke. Even though they knew Will was alive now, these mouth breathers didn't, and it wasn't right to joke about Mike's friend being dead. Eleven stood right next to him, watching the two mouth breathers, almost daring them to do something so she could use her powers on them.

"Didn't you listen to the counselor, Wheeler? Grief shows itself in funny ways," the taller boy wasn't taking Mike seriously. Eleven took her eyes off of Mike and the mouth breathers momentarily, only because she could sense more eyes watching, a crowd forming around them as they sensed a fight.

"Besides... what's there to be sad about anyway. Will's in fairyland now right? Flying around with all the other little fairies. All happy and gay. Lalalalala," the shorter boy joked, making the other one laugh.

Eleven didn't understand exactly the mouth breather's words but she understood his intent. And she also could feel how upset and angry Mike was beside her and it was making her feel upset and angry too.

She watched Mike's face carefully, sensing he was on the verge of doing something. And she was right. Because as the mouth breathers turned and walked away, Mike rushed forward and shoved the one called Troy hard in the back, sending him to the ground. The children all around gasping in shock. From Mike's gentle nature she knew this

wasn't behavior that was normal for him.

She knew the mouth breather would retaliate and she'd be there when he did.

The mouth breather pushed himself up from the ground and charged at Mike, yelling, "You're dead, Wheeler! Dead!"

But she allowed him no more than two steps in Mike's direction. She would not let him hurt Mike and she certainly wasn't going to let him make Mike dead.

Focusing her mind, despite the various distractions around her, Eleven tilted her chin downward and forced the mouth breather to urinate on himself. It was the first thing she had thought of to humiliate him. In the lab, she remembered one of the guards wetting himself when she scared him by using her powers for the first time and the other guards had made fun of him for months. So, she knew this would have the desired effect and maybe get him to leave Mike alone.

The kids around them laughed but Eleven continued until his bladder was empty and urine was running down the entirety of his leg, making a small puddle on the floor at his feet.

Slowly, Mike turned to look at her in wonder and she smiled back at him. She liked how he was looking at her. It made her feel good, but she could feel the tell-tale blood tickling her nose. So, she swiped the blood away with her hand, and spun away towards the door, but not before giving Mike a meaningful look.

Mike could hardly keep the smile off his face. The image of Troy wetting himself in front of the whole school was one he would keep with him for a long time. He had been so sure that he was going to get pummeled as the bigger boy had charged at him, but he had watched in awe as he froze in place, no longer in control of himself.

El had saved him and punished Troy in the process for being the bully that he was, and Mike couldn't have appreciated her more. The other day Lucas had said she wasn't a superhero, just a 'weirdo,' but

this sort of proved him wrong.

But they were on a mission, so he forced himself to stay focused on the task at hand. They had finally managed to get into the Audio Visual room, unlocking the door with the keys Mr. Clarke had given them, and locking the door behind them. Mike pulled the chair out for El and she sat down, seeming to study the machine for a moment.

"Now what?" Dustin asked as they all crowded around her. Mike turned on the radio and answered,

"She'll find him. Right, El?" Mike turned his gaze to her, but she stared resolutely forward, her lips slightly parted as she looked down at the large radio. He had the utmost faith in her, but she didn't respond. She seemed to be in her own world as Mike fiddled with knobs, tuning it but he stopped as soon as her eyes slid closed, her hands flat on the table on either side of the Heathkit.

Something about her demeanor had changed and for a moment Mike had a bad feeling about the whole thing, like he should call the whole thing off. But Will's life was in danger and they wouldn't be able to find him without her. As the static filled the room, something about the energy change in the room, he could tell whatever she was doing was working.

"She's doing it! She's finding him," he said excitedly as he watched her face carefully, watching for any sign of distress from the girl.

"This is insane," Dustin added, but Lucas still wasn't a believer, even after everything El had showed them.

"Calm down, she just closed her eyes."

But just as his words ended, the single light bulb above them went out, plummeting them all into darkness. The boys eyes shot upward and gasped in surprise.

"Holy...", Dustin breathed, but then an ominous thumping noise could be heard over the radio, drawing their attention back to the radio.

"What's that?" Dustin asked apprehensively, looking around at each of them. They had no idea, but it didn't sound good.

The radio crackled a little and then very distinctly, a weak whimper came through the static, "*Mom?*"

"No way," Lucas couldn't believe it. Even hearing it, his brain couldn't register that he was actually hearing Will. But there was no doubt and they all shouted out for their friend,

"Will!?"

"Will?! Are you there?!"

"Will, can you hear us?!"

The thumping sound continued, as did Will's voice calling to his mother.

"Why can't he hear us?" Lucas growled in frustration.

"I don't know!" Mike was equally as frustrated as the sound of their friend's fearful voice continued, "*It's like home but it's so dark and it's cold! Mom!*"

Terror pierced every word from Will, and it was getting harder and harder for the boys to listen. Mike's heart pounded in fear for his friend's life as each word seemed to indicate he was in greater danger than any of them could have imagined.

Then all of sudden the Heathkit shot off sparks and spontaneously caught fire. Mike made to step forward towards El but luckily Dustin was quick on his toes because he grabbed the fire extinguisher off the wall and smothered the flames.

The light had come back on but alarms were sounding all around them. Mike then noticed the familiar bloody nose on El after she used her powers but something else was off about her too.

As soon as the flames were out, Mike bent to her eye level, grabbing her by the shoulders gently but firmly, so he could turn her towards him and look into her eyes.

"El, are you okay?!" Mike asked, fear coursing through him, but she didn't respond. She just stared at him blankly, the blood having

traveled all the way down to her upper lip.

His heart felt like it was in his throat as he searched her eyes to see what was wrong with her. She looked awful; all of the color had seemed to drain out of her face, so much so that he could see the spider web of veins on her face. Her breathing was shallow and she blinked slowly as if it was a struggle to even keep her eyes open.

She must have strained herself, overexerting her powers, and Mike wished he had listened to his instinct when he felt something was up with her.

"Can you move?" his worry turning into full blown panic. He had never seen her like this. She was so weak that she couldn't even speak. His breathing was becoming labored, wishing she would just say something, anything so he knew she was going to be all right.

"Help her up!" he ordered, running to her side and lifting her by the arm, while Lucas did the same behind her. Whatever ill-will Lucas had felt towards her vanishing in the heat of the moment. Dustin moved in and lifted her feet.

They knew there was no way they were going to be able to carry her out of the school like this, so they hastily found a cart and put her gently down onto it. It was still going to draw a lot of attention, but they didn't have much of a choice. They needed to get El out of the school and to safety so they could figure out what was wrong with her.

They wheeled her out of the school as fast as they could, Mike leading the way. All the while, Mike's eyes kept looking over at her as El leaned back limply on the cart, praying that she would be okay. He needed her to be okay.

A/N: I hope you all had a good new years! Thank you guys so much for your awesome reviews! Please keep them coming! I always appreciate honest feedback so your kind words and super encouraging to me. This chapter was super challenging for some reason so let me know what you think. I hope to get a chapter out almost every day but with work and all it's going to

be challenging. Luckily, like I said it's all pretty much written and each chapter just needs some editing, so you'll never have to wait too long for a chapter, I promise. As always, thank you so much for reading and reviewing!

5. Chapter 5: The Flea and the Acrobat

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CHAPTER 5: THE FLEA AND THE ACROBAT

By some miracle, the boys had gotten Eleven out of the school. Even in her exhaustion she was aware of being wheeled on some kind cart through the halls. The harsh brightness reminded her a little of the lab, but she was so too tired to even care.

In all the times she had used her powers, Eleven had never felt this drained before, and it made her feel so weak and vulnerable. She was slipping in and out of consciousness, but she could make out the blurry outline of Mike in front of her, pulling the front of the cart, and leading the way. Her vision was swimming, but she could see his face as he regularly turned to look back at her. She wanted to tell him she was okay because he looked so scared, but she couldn't even muster the energy to speak. Again, she blacked out for a second.

They must have gotten her outside at some point because a different kind of brightness seared her eyes and she could tell it was the sun. Slowly, as her senses returned to her, she became aware the hard, semi-smooth surface was sitting on, and the feeling of something warm on her shoulder. She forced her eyelids open and there was Mike, concerned brown eyes watching her as she blinked against the light, letting her eyes adjust.

"Hey, are you okay?" he asked her softly, and she realized the warmth she was feeling on her shoulder was his hand, steadying her. Now, that she was more alert she could tell she was sitting, leaned against the building, outside in some kind of secluded alley.

Eleven didn't even try to get her vocal chords to obey her so she just nodded at him tiredly. He didn't believe her, she could tell because the deep crease remained in the skin between his eyes.

"Do you think you can hang on so I can get you home?" Mike

gestured to the bike beside them. Her heart warmed a little at Mike's use of the word, 'home.' Her little fort had come to feel more like home than the lab ever had.

Lucas and Dustin stood quietly by, shifting uncomfortably. And she remembered what they had heard on the radio; their friend had sounded so scared, they must still be in shock.

She did feel a little better, so she nodded in response. As much as she liked getting out of the basement because she had gotten bored without Mike there, Eleven was anxious to get back to the safety of her fort in her weakened state.

Mike's other hand reached for hers and she grasped it tightly, so he could pull her up. Eleven hadn't realized how wobbly her legs still were because she swayed for a moment before she grasped Mike's forearms and he steadied her. Mike's brow had furrowed even further if that was even possible as he suggested, "We can wait. You can rest some more, if you need to."

But she shook her head in protest at his suggestion. Really it was difficult to think, not because she was drained, but because she was very aware of Mike's closeness. This was the most they had touched since she had met him, and it was making her arms feel like they were on fire, in a good way, even though their skin wasn't even touching.

"I'm okay," she managed, her voice shaky and not really proving her point.

But Mike didn't argue, he released her and lifted his bike. The other two boys helped her onto the back of it and she lifted her feet onto the pegs. She was barely strong enough to hang onto him, so she leaned heavily against his back. Mike pulled her arms around him and after he pushed off and got moving, he reached down with his left and held her hand firmly around his middle, doing his best to prevent her from falling off. Throughout the bike ride, Mike whispered reassuring words to her and it made her feel a better.

Dustin and Lucas followed behind, just in case she slipped off, but they were still far enough away that they couldn't hear Mike.

"You're gonna be okay, El. We're almost home," he told her, but she noticed his voice was a little shaky too, even as he said it. His words and being this close to him made her feel those butterflies in her stomach again, but she tried to focus on not falling off the bike.

The ride wasn't very far but it felt both too long and too short; too long because she was struggling to stay conscious and hold on, too short because she wanted to stay this close to Mike forever.

They eventually made it back to Mike's house and the dark-haired boy carefully eased down the bike and held her steady at the same time. His eyes were full of concern for her. He put her arm around his shoulders and slipped his own around her waist, helping her the short distance to the basement door. Dustin rushing up to her other side to help support her weight.

As soon as they were in the basement the two boys helped El onto the couch and almost as soon as her head hit the soft fabric she fell asleep.

She couldn't have been out long but when she woke she noticed that her bloody nose had been wiped clean. Also, Mike had Eggo's waiting for her on the little table next to the couch. She reached over and ate them greedily, trying to replenish her energy.

Mike must have noticed her movement because he glanced over at her from his spot at the other side of the room and smiled at her. "Hey...feeling better?" he asked hopefully.

"Yes," was her simple reply around a mouthful of Eggo's. Her answer seemed to make him happy because his smile widened, and he took a seat at the other end of the couch, but then it faltered slightly.

"Good... I was- I was worried about you there for minute. That was a really cool thing you did back there, to help us find Will." His voice had gone quiet and serious and she decided her heart liked it better when he was happy and smiling, so she tried to make him feel better.

"Friend is someone you do anything for'," she replied with a small smile and her quoting him had the desired effect; Mike's smile returned and it made her happy. It was a lot of words but it was

worth it to see Mike happy again.

She had been so caught up in Mike that she had almost forgotten that Lucas and Dustin were even there but she could hear them quietly debating Will's words they had heard over the radio. She watched as Mike turned his attention to them and a look of concentration took over his face.

When she was done eating, she laid out on her stomach on the couch, her feet almost touching his side, listening to the boys' conversation.

"Like home... like home... but dark?" she heard Mike repeating Will's words over and over before he stood up. She already missed his closeness, but she remained still conserving her energy.

"But empty," Lucas added, equally lost about what Will had meant.

"Empty and cold... wait, did he say cold?" Dustin contributed.

"I don't know. The stupid radio kept going in and out," Eleven bristled a little at Lucas' words. First, he didn't believe her and now he was criticizing the limits of her powers. Nothing she did was good enough... just like with Papa.

"it's like riddles in the dark," Dustin said more to himself than anything. El just watched and listened to them from her spot on the couch, unable to explain to them with words. They were so close to the answer. Mike was really smart. She knew he would figure it out.

"Like home... like his house?" Mike piped up, and El kept her eyes trained on him as he paced the basement.

"Maybe like Hawkins!" Lucas exclaimed and El knew they needed a little extra help to get there.

"Upside Down," she said weakly, staring at Mike. If anyone was going to understand her, it would be him.

"What'd she say?" Lucas didn't even direct his question to her which only annoyed her further.

"Upside Down....," Mike repeated, staring at her and she could almost

see him making the connections. Before he turned to stride over to the table in the center of the room and sitting down at one of the chairs.

Lucas wasn't getting it. "What?"

"Upside Down," Mike had heard her, and he understood. He was the only one that really listened to her, believed in her. "When El showed us where Will was she flipped the board over, remember?"

Mike demonstrated this by mimicking El's previous gesture of taking the game board and flipping it to its dark side. She was relieved he got it and could explain it to the others. But also apprehensive.

"Upside Down, dark, empty," he began, but again Lucas interjected,

"Do you understand what he's talking about?"

"No," Dustin replied shortly.

"Guys, come on. Just think about it. When El took us to find Will she took us to his house, right?" Mike began and El liked the sound of his voice. He was finally able to see what she hadn't been able to say.

"Yeah, and he wasn't there," Lucas said in annoyance, still not seeing that she had tried to show them from the beginning.

"But what if he was there? What if we just couldn't see him? What if he was on the other side?" Mike asked, "What if this is Hawkins?" he flipped the board once more, "And what if this is where Will is? The Upside Down."

Eleven smiled from her spot on the couch. He figured it out. She knew he would.

"Like the Vale of Shadows," she didn't understand Dustin's words, but she could tell he was starting to understand too.

She was starting to get tired again, but she fought sleep for as long as she could even as they pulled out a book and began to read from it.

"The Vale of Shadows is a dimension that is a dark reflection or

shadow of our world," Dustin read, "It is a place of decay and death, a plane out of phase, a place of monsters. It is right next to you and you don't even see it."

"An alternate dimension," Mike surmised.

"But how do we get there?" Lucas asked, solemnly.

"We cast Shadow Walk," Dustin answered immediately, aggravating the other boy.

"In real life, dummy," he shot back.

"We can't Shadow Walk... but maybe she can," Dustin suggested, casting a sideways glance towards her on the couch. They all turned to look at her and she was scared this would happen.

Eleven's heart sunk at the realization; they would find out her secret soon enough and then they wouldn't be friends anymore.

"Do you know how we get there? To the Upside Down?" Mike asked her, in a voice he seemed to reserve just for her. Mike wouldn't want to be friends anymore.

She hated it, but she couldn't tell him. It was too dangerous. Friends don't lie, but there were things worse than Mike being mad at her for lying. And that was Mike getting hurt or dead. So, she shook her head just slightly, maybe it was less of a lie if she didn't say it.

There was something about the way that El didn't want to change out of the dress or take the wig off even to sleep that made Mike's heart hurt. He figured if those bad people wouldn't even let her grow out her hair then they probably didn't let her wear nice clothes either, so he didn't push it. It was an adjustment getting used to her with the wig on, but if she liked it then he liked it too even though he thought she was pretty the way she was.

He helped her settle into the fort as was becoming their norm, just relieved that she was all right after the scare they'd had earlier. Seeing her like that, so fragile looking, had terrified him. As badly as he wanted to find Will, Mike wouldn't do it at the expense of El's life.

The next day was Will's funeral. It was weird. Going to a funeral for a friend you knew was alive. And they had to get all dressed up for it which Mike was not really a fan of, or so he thought. He reconsidered his position when he went down to the basement to bring El her daily breakfast of Eggo's and she smiled at him instantly.

At first, he thought maybe he had something on his face, but as he sat down beside her while she ate, she glanced down to his vest, tie, and dress shirt and said in that quiet voice of hers, "Pretty."

If literally anyone else had called him pretty, he would have been pissed but he knew what she was trying to say. Mike was fairly certain his entire face was on fire as he averted his gaze, unable to meet her eyes. Her two-syllable word had managed to make him feel warm all over and his heart pound loudly in his chest. Despite all this, he couldn't help the smile that crept onto his face. El thought he was pretty. He'd take that any day of the week.

Gathering himself, he had explained to her where he was going, and that he would be back in a little while, hopefully with some answers from Mr. Clarke. She seemed to understand but her expression had turned serious.

Mike and the other boys came back to the Wheeler house after the funeral for whatever that thing was they were burying. Whatever it was, it wasn't Will. Even Lucas could see that now.

All of their minds were still reeling after Mr. Clarke's explanation of the flea and acrobat.

He was still in his nice clothes but having shed the jacket as he hurried to share Mr. Clarke's theory to El. She sat next to him on the couch now, listening intently as he spoke, but there was something in her expression that Mike couldn't read. If Mike had to guess, she seemed a little afraid, but after everything she had been through it didn't strike him as odd.

"It would take a lot of energy to build a gate like this, but that's gotta be what happened. Otherwise, how did Will get there, right?" Mike surmised, Eleven's eyes widening slightly after he stabbed the pencil through the paper.

"R-right," El seemed to agree hesitantly. Mike's concern for her was growing, something was bothering her, but he'd ask her about after the guys left.

"What we want to know is... do you know where the gate is?" Lucas asked her pointedly and Mike watched her shake her head slightly. He was beginning to notice Dustin pacing around the basement, but he ignored it for now as Lucas became angry with El again, "Then how do you know about the Upside Down?"

Mike thought it was a legitimate question, even if he didn't appreciate Lucas' delivery, but El offered no answers, looking away from them both to stare at Dustin, drawing his attention to the curly haired boy as well. Mike mouthed 'I don't know,' to Lucas before looking over to Dustin.

"Dustin, what are you doing?"

But their friend continued his circling as if he hadn't spoken.

"Dustin.... Dustin!"

Finally, he looked up, seeming to notice them for the first time.

"I need to see your compasses," he demanded.

"What?" Mike asked, confused.

"Your compasses. All of your compasses, right now!"

So, they searched around the house and managed to find several compasses before bringing them back down to lay them on the D&D table. Dustin flipped them all over and a smile was beginning to spread across his face.

"What's exciting about this?" Mike sighed, but still curious as to what his friend had figured out.

"Well, they're all facing North, right?"

"Yeah...so?" Lucas obviously just wanted their friend to get to the point.

"Well, that's not True North," Dustin started.

"What do you mean?" Mike asked, his interest piqued.

"I mean exactly what I just said, that's not True North," he repeated, annoyance seeping into his tone at the other's not following. "Are you both seriously this dense?"

After a confused shrug from Lucas, Dustin continued, "The sun rises in the east and sets in the west. Which means *that's* True North." He pointed in a direction, but Mike wasn't getting it yet either.

"So, what you're saying is the compasses are broken," Mike deduced incorrectly apparently because Dustin picked up one of the compasses.

"Do you even understand how a compass works? Do you see a battery pack on this?"

"No," Mike said defensively, as Dustin held the compass up in front of his face.

"No, you don't because it doesn't need one. The needle's naturally drawn to the Earth's magnetic North Pole," he explained, setting the compass back down.

"So, what's wrong with them?" Lucas wanted to get to the point.

"Well, that's what I couldn't figure out but then I remembered, you can change the direction of a compass with a magnet. If there's a presence of a more powerful magnetic field, then the needle deflects to that power. And then I remembered what Mr. Clarke said, the Gate would have so much power..." Dustin was on a roll and Mike finally got it.

"Disrupt the electromagnetic field," he finished, comprehension dawning on him as he looked at his friend in awe.

"Exactly."

"Meaning if we follow the compasses North..." Lucas began, understanding as well, but Dustin finished for him anyway.

"They should lead us to the Gate."

No, no, no, no. This was the only word Eleven's brain was screaming as the boys slowly pieced together how to find the Gate. It was too dangerous. They would get hurt. Mike would get hurt.

She refused to let that happen.

So, while Eleven had learned that friends don't lie, she lied anyway. Worse still, as they began following the compasses, Dustin and Lucas in front, her and Mike a few yards behind, she altered the direction the compasses were pointing in. She had them follow these train tracks, that's what Mike called them.

She knew he would be so mad when he found out she lied, but by then he would be far from the Gate and far away from the monster and the bad people.

Using her powers for this extended of a period, even though it was on something so small, was starting to take its toll on her. She was regularly wiping her nose as discretely as she could, but she could feel Lucas suspicious eyes on her every time he turned to look at her. Mike seemed to either not notice or ignore it, thankfully.

She was beginning to feel light-headed and weak as they walked. Her breathing labored as she tried to focus on putting one foot in front of the other. But her mind kept getting drawn back to Papa making her go into the bath and to find the monster. He had promised it couldn't hurt her but a part of her hadn't believed him even then. He had asked her if it was okay if she went in the bath, but she knew she didn't really have a choice. Now that she was free she couldn't help but wonder, had Papa ever really cared about her? Or just wanted to use her for her 'gifts?'

She knew the answer now. Because of Mike. Mike showed her that she was more than her powers, that she could be pretty good, that she was more than a number.

She had to save him.

"Mike," she said his name and abruptly grabbed his arm. The boys had changed out of their nice clothes, and Eleven secretly wished Mike had stayed in his because she thought he was pretty in them. He was pretty all the time, but she liked him in the nice clothes especially.

Mike gave her his usual, "yeah," because he seemed just as lost in thought as she had been moment's ago.

"Turn back," she pleaded, glancing behind them to emphasize her point.

This caused him to look at her briefly, confusion coloring his features. Mike really was pretty, his dark hair falling in his face.

"What? Why?" he asked, startled by her words.

"I'm tired," she dead-panned. It wasn't a lie, not really. Using her powers really was exhausting her.

"Look, I'm sure we're almost there. Just hold on a little longer," Mike reassured her but that was not the response she was hoping for.

Mike was a good friend and he cared very much for Will which made her feel even worse for leading them astray. She stopped for just a moment and looked behind her, wishing that she and Mike were back in his basement, in the fort he made her, far away from the bad men and the monster and safe.

So, that's what she tried to do... lead them back home. But Dustin noticed when they reached a clearing with all kinds of broken things.

"Oh, no," she heard him groan.

"Oh, no what?" Lucas asked in annoyance, clearly impatient and tired from all the walking.

"We're headed back home," he clarified.

Eleven listened to them as they continued to argue. She didn't like it when Lucas yelled at Mike, but Dustin was nice too and didn't deserve to be yelled at. She wished she could tell them but also

hoped they would never find out. But the tension was building and it was only a matter of time now. And then it happened.

"She's been acting weirder than normal. If she can slam doors with her mind, then she can definitely screw up a compass," Lucas accused, pointing a finger at her.

Eleven offered no defense but Mike jumped in immediately, making her heart sear with guilt. He trusted her to a fault and she had lied to him. And now he was defending her when what she doing was indefensible.

"Why would she do that?" Mike raised his voice.

"Because she's trying to sabotage our mission! Because she's a traitor!" Lucas's anger was rising with every word he spoke.

The back of her eyes burned with unshed tears because every bad thing he was saying was true. She didn't know what a traitor was, but it was obviously bad and he was probably right. She was a bad friend.

And then he slowly started to approach her threateningly. She didn't back away, didn't try to defend herself.

"Lucas, what are you doing?" Mike's voice held a warning there.

"You did it, didn't you?" he accused as he came within inches of her face, his hate-filled eyes felt like they were burning holes in her. She could see Mike hurry to her side out of the corner of her eye. "You don't want us to find the Gate. You don't want us to find, Will."

"Lucas, c'mon seriously. Just leave her alone!" Mike yelled, but Lucas wasn't done with her.

"Admit it," he growled, and she opened her mouth to speak but she was startled when he screamed in her face again, "Admit it!"

And then he grabbed her right wrist tightly, gripping so hard that it hurt, flipping it over to see the blood from her nose there on the sleeve of Mike's jacket. She knew she was found out. It's why she offered no resistance. She was a little drained from using her powers,

but she could still hurt him back if she wanted, but she didn't want to.

"Fresh blood! I knew it," Lucas released her wrist roughly and smacked it hard away from him, in disgust.

"Lucas, c'mon!" she could feel Mike's anger building just as quickly. She would have felt good that he was coming to her defense if she didn't deserve everything Lucas was doling out.

"I saw her wiping her nose on the tracks. She was using her powers," Lucas accused, addressing Mike this time.

"Bull! That's old blood. Right, El?" Mike looked to her for confirmation. But she couldn't do it. She couldn't keep lying. "Right, El?"

She wanted to cry. This feeling was worse than being locked in the dark room. This feeling that she had betrayed the only person who had ever believed in her, even if it was to keep him from being hurt. She hated herself, but she needed Mike to understand.

"It's not... It's not safe," she tried to explain, shaking her head slightly, hoping he wouldn't go away again like when he thought she was lying about Will being alive. But this was a real lie, not a misunderstanding.

Mike seemed to be at a loss for words as he looked at her, but he didn't seem angry. Not at her anyway. If anything, that only made her feel worse.

"What did I tell you? She's been playing us from the beginning!" Lucas shouted in Mike's face, all his anger about Mike and El boiling over. Her leading them away from the Gate was just the last straw.

Subconsciously, Mike sort of knew she was acting a little strangely, not just during their hike following the compasses, but when he explained the theory around the Gate as well. Despite this, he couldn't be mad at her. If she had lied to them, then it was for a good reason and he had come to trust her as one of the party, which is why

he was defending her now to one of his best friends.

"That's not true! She helped us find Will!" he countered, his own irritation nearing a breaking point. He was so tired of Lucas being a jerk to her; he called her a freak, a werido, never believed a word she said, accused her of being responsible for every bad thing that happened, and then worst of all, putting his hands on her and scaring her.

Mike considered himself a smart guy but even he couldn't comprehend the connection he and El seemed to have developed in such a short period of time. He just seemed to understand her without her speaking. And he knew the bad men had hurt her in ways he may never know, so Lucas had no right to scare her or put his hands on her, even if she was lying to them about the Gate. To Mike, hearing her breathless words, 'it's not safe,' had told him everything he needed to know. She was trying to protect them.

"Find Will? Find Will? Where is he then?" Lucas mocked, turning around the clearing quarry, "Huh? I don't see him."

"Yeah, you know what I mean," Mike said in frustration.

"No, I actually don't," Lucas rounded on him again, "Just think about it, Mike. She could have just told us where the Upside Down was right away, but she didn't! She just made us run around like headless chickens."

As Lucas was yelling at him, Mike glanced over his supposed friend's shoulder and could see El getting upset. His heart ached to see her on the verge of tears and he just knew she hadn't done any of this intentionally.

Dustin stepped up at this point, obviously seeing things were getting out of hand.

"Calm down! Calm down," Dustin put a hand on Lucas's shoulder, but he just slapped it off roughly, beyond the point of no return.

"No! She used us! All of us! She helped just enough to get what she wants: food and a bed," Lucas was fired up now and the way he said

those things about El felt dirty and wrong. Mike could see her out of the corner of his eye, hurt in her light brown eyes, her lips slightly parted as if wanting to say something but couldn't. "She's like a stray dog."

Those last words bordered on unforgivable. How dare he compare her to an animal? Why couldn't he see what Mike saw? That she was clearly someone who had been used and abused her whole life by bad men and treated like a dog. And now, she had escaped only for Lucas to dehumanize her again. It took everything in Mike's power not to punch his best friend in the mouth, but he didn't know how much more of this he could take. El didn't deserve any of this.

"Screw you, Lucas!" he screamed, seeing red.

"No, screw you, Mike!" Lucas refused to back down, "You're blind! Blind that you like that a girl's not grossed out by you! But wake up, man! Wake the hell up!"

That hurt. Lucas knew how he felt about El, knew about how self-conscious he was around her, even if he didn't say it out loud to them, and he used that against Mike.

"She knows where Will is and she's just letting him die in the Upside Down," Lucas didn't stop, even though Mike knew his face had gone slack. The hurt temporarily outweighing his anger, but only briefly before it reared its ugly head again.

"Shut up!" he roared back in Lucas' face.

"For all we know it's her fault," Lucas went on as if Mike hadn't spoken.

"Shut up!" he repeated, his voice getting louder, but Lucas continued undeterred.

"We're looking for some stupid monster," he began, shoving Mike in the shoulder before turning to look at El, "but did you ever stop to think that maybe she's the monster."

That was it. Lucas had crossed a line. As Lucas said this, Mike was looking at El, the way her face twisted in pain at his words and tears

began to streak down her face. Something in Mike snapped, he could feel it, and he didn't know if he could've been stopped by anything at this point.

It was one thing for Lucas to mock him the other day at recess for the way he treated El, which he wasn't ashamed of, she deserved to be treated like the human being she was and not a dog. He had even overlooked his constant need to call her the 'weirdo,' but this was too much. She was no monster.

"I said, shut up!" he screamed, surprising them all, himself included, by grabbing Lucas around the neck and trying to throw him to the ground. But Lucas held his grip and they both went down hard.

As they scuffled, Mike was only peripherally aware of Dustin and El screaming at them. But his rage made it impossible for him to see or hear anything around him.

Unfortunately for him, Lucas was stronger and threw him onto his back. Straddling him, Lucas raised his fist in the air to punch Mike in the face when an invisible force shoved Lucas away, hard. Mike watched in horror as his friend was catapulted into the air and landed, sliding until he hit some scrap metal several yards away.

His breath caught in his throat. Mike had never intended for anyone to get hurt. Finding his footing, Mike ran over to his friend, Dustin on his heels, both of them calling Lucas' name. It had looked as though he hit his head pretty hard. Adrenaline coursed through him as he shook his friend in a panic, the anger leaving him completely for a moment.

"Lucas? Are you all right? Lucas? Wake up!" Mike and Dustin continued in a panic, but Lucas was out cold. Mike knew who had done it. He turned to her briefly and could see the tell-tale blood dripping from her nose, a look of horror on her face.

"Why would you do that?" he yelled at her. Maybe it was his own guilt at having jumped Lucas but even now, he knew he was going to regret shouting at her when she so obviously hadn't meant to harm Lucas.

"What's wrong with you? What is wrong with you?" he repeated his previous words to her in his fear for Lucas' safety and anger at himself for letting it get this far. Subconsciously, Mike knew she was just trying to protect him, but she didn't understand that friends fight but no one was actually going to get hurt, until she used her powers. Maybe she didn't even know how strong she was, but Lucas could've gotten seriously hurt or worse.

He couldn't deal with all the guilt right now; the guilt of fighting with Lucas, the guilt of yelling at El, all of it, so he turned back to focus on making sure his friend was okay.

Eventually, Lucas did wake up. But he wasn't interested in their concern, slapping away Mike's hand when he tried to touch his head to inspect the wound, if there was any.

"Get off me!" was all Lucas would say, again slapping Mike's hand away as he tried to touch him, standing up and stomping away, angrily. Mike made to follow him, but Dustin held him back, and he knew he was right. Lucas needed space. Honestly, Mike did too after all that.

The adrenaline was slowly slipping out of his system as he turned around. At least he could apologize to El for yelling at her in his anger, but as he turned she was no longer there.

"Where's El?" he asked no one in particular, panic setting in immediately.

"El! El!" he shouted over again, circling in place to scan the area, hoping for a glimpse of the blonde wig and pink dress. But he knew he had scared her and she had run away.

"Eleven!" Dustin's voice added to his, echoing off the metal of the scrap yard.

"El!" he called out to her until his throat burned. They split up and searched for her, Mike's heart sinking deeper and deeper as he realized he was to blame. He had sworn to himself not to yell at her like that again after they discovered Will's body, and yet he had done it. And now she was gone.

A/N: Hi all, I hope you enjoyed this chapter because this was easily one of my favorites to write! I appreciate all your kind words of encouragement, it helps me stay motivated. There is definitely a correlation between reviews and how quickly I update, just saying Anyways, let me know what you think of the chapter and thanks for reading!

6. Chapter 6: The Monster

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CHAPTER 6: THE MONSTER

Mike and Dustin had searched all afternoon and as late into the night as they dared without their parents calling out a search party for them. Eventually, after much convincing from Dustin, Mike finally agreed to suspend the search until daylight and they made their way back to their neighborhood. Even as they walked Mike never stopped scanning his surroundings with his flashlight though, hoping El would step out of the trees. But she didn't.

As they neared their houses, he and Dustin went their separate ways, agreeing to meet up at the Wheeler's first thing to search for El if she didn't come back tonight. Wishing they had ridden their bikes when they had been following the compasses, Mike trudged the last few yards to his basement, his feet throbbing from almost a full day of walking. A small part of him still held out hope that he would find El snuggled up in her fort or on the couch, waiting for him to come home. But when he opened the door quietly, the room was dark, just as he had left it, the fort empty.

His heart sunk and then the fear really started to tear into his chest. A million scenarios cycling through his mind, each one more awful than the next. What if she was lost in Mirkwood? What if she was hurt? What if the bad men had found her? What if she was...?

Mike wasn't willing to go any further down that dark path. He didn't know what he would do if El was hurt...or worse. He refused to go there.

So, he strained his brain, trying to think of anywhere he could look for El tomorrow but still hoping she would come back on her own in time for her morning Eggo's. When his mom called him up for dinner, he ate in relative silence, answering only his mom's direct questions. She didn't really push, which he was thankful for but it was only

because she probably thought he was still upset from Will's funeral.

When he was done eating, Mike went to his room without a word and lay awake for hours. His mind was racing with everything that had happened not just today but the last few days. The knowledge that El wasn't down in the basement made it feel as though his heart had a gaping hole in it. He had only known her for a couple days, and she didn't really talk much, but Mike had come to like her, really like her.

Being around her just felt right, like he had finally found someone who really understood him, what he was thinking, how he was feeling, and not just on a surface level. She made him feel like he was more than just the nerdy A.V. Club president who got pushed around by bullies without putting up much of a fight. She made him feel like he could stand up for himself and his friends. She made him feel like he could be brave. Before El, he had only been peripherally interested in the girls at his school, feeling like they were all too interested in makeup and hair and stuff. Which was ironic really because El liked those things too but she liked them because she had never been allowed to have them. She was someone he wanted to spend all his time around, learn everything he could about her, protect her, take care of her. It made his heart swell every time she smiled because he knew she hadn't had a lot to smile about in her life. All he wanted to do was make her feel happy. So, why had it taken her leaving to make him realize all this?

Now, all he could think was that El was out there somewhere, cold and alone, just as he had found her. Or worse, the bad men had found her and taken her back to whatever hell she had risked her life to escape from, all because he had made her feel like he didn't want her around. Lucas may have called her a monster, but he had made her feel like one when he yelled at her like that. He'd give anything to find her safe so he could tell her how much he wanted her around.

His mind just circled around these thoughts until his body physically couldn't stay awake any longer and he sunk into a restless sleep.

Mike awoke feeling like he hadn't slept at all, physically and emotionally exhausted. It was a Sunday morning but he shot up from his bed nonetheless, remembering the events of yesterday. Getting dressed quickly, Mike sprinted down the stairs, past his mom and

Holly in the kitchen, and straight down to the basement.

But the fort was still empty. El hadn't come back.

A searing pain shot through his chest because he knew, this was all his fault. The pain quickly turned to anger. Not at her but how utterly and completely stupid he had been for yelling at her again, especially after he had promised himself he wouldn't do it again. In a fit of rage at himself, Mike tore the fort apart, kicking the pillows as hard as he could. While it released some of the anger, it did nothing to fix the sharp, stabbing guilt he felt.

If anything happened to her...

A knocking made Mike's eyes snap to the door. A glimmer of hope filled him, maybe it was El, but just as quickly that glimmer fizzled out because Mike knew she wouldn't knock. Either way he rushed to the door, just in case and flung it open, disappointed to see Dustin there.

For what seemed like the billionth time, they rehashed all the possibilities of where El could have gone, but in his hopelessness Mike kept coming back to the reason she was gone in the first place.

"I just can't believe she didn't come back," Mike groaned, pacing back and forth in his basement. Dustin was there but he was mostly talking to himself. Now the anxiety of actually verbalizing all this was starting to get to him. It was as if the flood gates had opened and everything was just pouring out of him.

"Well, she's gotta be close," Dustin tried to reassure him, but he couldn't allow himself to feel better about this. It felt wrong somehow.

"She said it wasn't safe. She just messed up the compasses because she wanted to protect us. She didn't betray us," Mike continued as if Dustin hadn't spoken, panic creeping into his voice.

"Mike, calm down," Dustin tried again.

"I shouldn't have yelled at her. I never should have done that," he couldn't stop pacing. Part of him was afraid that if he stopped moving

all of the emotions he was feeling would cave in on him.

He hated himself so much for letting his emotions get the better of him when he had yelled at her. The image of her horrified, distraught face as he screamed at her was etched into his memory. She hadn't meant to hurt Lucas, he knew that. She was just scared and didn't want Lucas to hurt him. He had known that the second it happened and yet, his fear for Lucas' safety had made him react poorly in the heat of the moment.

"Mike, this isn't your fault," Dustin insisted.

"Yeah, it's Lucas'," Mike finally responded to his friend.

"It wasn't his fault either," at this Mike stopped pacing and turned to look at Dustin slowly in disbelief.

"It wasn't his fault?" Mike must have misheard him because there was no way that anyone who had been there wouldn't think that Lucas was the reason they were in this mess. He had called El a dog! A monster! In what world was that okay? Mike was getting fired up just remembering the way Lucas had grabbed El's arm, forcing her to show him the blood on her sleeve.

"No." Dustin said simply.

"So, you're saying he wasn't way out of line?" Mike could feel his anger rising again, but he wouldn't let it get the best of him. Dustin had been there, didn't he hear what Lucas had said about El?

"Totally! But so were you!"

"What?!" Mike was even more incredulous. Was he the only one that had been there yesterday? Seriously?

"And so was Eleven," Dustin had seemingly lost his patience at this point.

"Oh, give me a break," Mike scoffed. He had had all night to process it, it really was mostly Lucas' fault, after all if he hadn't been a jerk to El, Mike never would have tried to fight him and El would never have had to use her powers.

"No, Mike. You give me a break. All three of you were being a bunch of little assholes. I was the only reasonable one. But the bottom line is you pushed first, and you know the rules: draw first blood," Dustin reminded him.

"No! No way! I'm not shaking his hand," Mike protested hotly.

"You're shaking his hand," Dustin stood firm.

"No. I'm not."

"This isn't a discussion. This is a rule of law. Obey, or be banished from the party. Do you want to be banished?" Dustin asked, matter-of-factly.

"...No...", Mike agreed, hesitantly. Despite everything, Lucas was still his friend and what would Will do if he came back and there was no more party? Lucas was going to need to apologize to El, but so did Mike. They had both yelled at her, they both were in the wrong, but Mike would never have called her those awful things which was the huge difference in Mike's mind.

"Good." Dustin said with finality, grabbing his things and heading towards the door to the basement.

"Where are we going?"

"Where do you think? We're going to get Lucas, and then we're going to find Eleven," Dustin told him, leaving no room for debate. As much as he wanted to skip to finding El, Mike obeyed grabbing his back pack and following Dustin out the door reluctantly.

Alone. It was better than being in the lab, Eleven guessed. At least no one was trying to use her for her powers, or making her hurt people, or locking her in dark rooms. But alone also meant no Mike.

It hurt to think about the nice, dark-haired boy she had left behind. Mike had come to mean more to her than she had ever thought possible in such a short period of time. He took her in and took care of her with no expectations. Papa and the bad men at the lab were only nice to her when they wanted her to do something for them.

When Mike had found her in the rain, he had no idea that she had powers and yet he still helped her, gave her something to eat, and a place to sleep. He lied to his own Mama to keep the bad men from finding her, he stood up to his friends to defend her, and when she revealed her powers, he didn't try to use her; he wanted her help finding his friend but he always gave her the choice, something the bad men never did. Eleven felt drawn to him like no one else and it was taking every thing in her power to not run back to her fort, to him.

Eleven knew he'd be safer without her around. He could go back to being the happy boy with the whole heart before she came along and made him sad and angry and put him in danger and hurt his friends. Mike would be better off without her.

That's what she kept telling herself as she had run away from them, tears streaming down her face. She had no idea where she would go or what she would do, but just as Mike had said to her, there was something wrong with her, and she couldn't fix it so the only solution was to go. Lucas was right, Eleven felt every bit a monster. But hadn't she been made that way?

Eventually, she had slowed to a walk and kept going until it was dark. She found a little patch of leaves next to a tree and tried to sleep. She was so very tired and her heart felt so heavy. But all the noises in the trees kept her awake but so did memories of Papa and the lab. Her body must have succumbed to sleep at some point because she woke with a start, cold and alone again but it was daylight.

She had taken the pretty wig off to sleep and she stood to look at her reflection in some water nearby. When she went to put it back on, it just wasn't the same. The face that stared back at her was dirty, the makeup long gone; her eyes had dark circles underneath and her shaved head making her feel even uglier than normal. Lucas had called her a dog and maybe she was; sleeping on the ground, covered in dirt.

But Lucas' suggestion that she had taken advantage of Mike's kindness made her chest swell in anger though. She would never do that to Mike. He took her in out of the cold and the storm but she chose to

stay because he made her feel safe and understood her and called her pretty good.

Eleven stared angrily at the reflection. Why couldn't she be how Mike saw her? Nice and pretty and good? The answer was in her name. All she would ever be was Eleven.

In her anger, she screamed, using her powers to disrupt the water, so she didn't have to face the monster staring back at her anymore.

Lucas was the one being the little asshole at the moment, according to Mike. Not only had he refused to shake his hand when he opened the door, but now he was pacing around his living room dramatically as if he was better than him, less at fault for El being gone.

"Okay, I'll shake," Lucas finally had stopped pacing and turned to them, his arms folded across his chest. Mike sighed in annoyance at his friend's stupid theatrics but held his hand out nonetheless until Lucas started speaking again. "On one condition, we forget the weirdo and go straight to the Gate."

Mike was seeing red again. Why did Lucas feel the need to put El down like that by calling her a weirdo? They wouldn't even know about the Gate if it wasn't for her. And there was absolutely no way, he was going to waste any more time here when he could be out searching for El. So, his response was immediate and emphatic.

"Then the deal's off," he said angrily.

"Fine!" Lucas shouted throwing his hands in the air in frustration.

"Fine!" Mike yelled back. He wasn't going to budge on this. He needed to find El. Who knows what kind of danger she was in right now? It could already be too late.

"No! No! Not fine! Guys, seriously?" Dustin was fed up with them apparently because, he shoved Mike in the shoulder lightly, making him look at him, "Do you even remember what happened on the Blood Stone Path?"

Even in their anger, Lucas and Mike kind of shrugged at one another,

not following or seeing the relevance here.

"We couldn't agree on what path to take so we split up the party and those trolls took us out one by one? And it all went to shit and we were all disabled!" Dustin reminded them, getting fired up, "So we stick together! No matter what!"

Dustin had a point. They were stronger together and they would only be able to find El and save Will if they worked as a team.

"Yeah, I agree. But this is the party. Right here in this room," Lucas was being a stubborn ass about this. Why couldn't El be a member of the party? It's not like they hadn't added people before, Dustin had come along later and they welcomed him in, why was El any different?

"El's one of us now," Mike insisted, and she was and more to him, but Lucas refused to acknowledge that.

"Uh, no. She's not! Not even close! She never will be! She's a liar, she's a traitor,-" Lucas vehemently argued, counting on his fingers as he listed the charges against El, but Mike's anger was dangerously close to where it had been yesterday when they had fought.

"She was just trying to keep us safe! She didn't mean to hurt you! It was an accident!" he defended El, cutting Lucas off before he called El some other unforgiveable name.

"An *accident*?" Lucas asked in disbelief.

"Accident or not, admit it. It was a little awesome," Dustin contributed, and Mike agreed even as the fire in his chest threatened to boil over.

"Awesome?!"

"She threw you in the air with her mind!"

"I could have been *killed*!"

"Which is exactly why we need her! She's a weapon. Do you seriously want to fight the Demogorgon with your Wrist Rocket?" Mike

countered hotly, "That's like R2-D2 going to fight Darth Vader. We're no use to Will if we're dead."

He hated how that sounded, as if El's only purpose was to be, 'a weapon' to help them get to Will. He didn't really feel that way, but he thought it might be the only way to convince Lucas, after all he had never really seen her as a person, much less the girl she was.

"If you two want to waste your time looking for a traitor, then go ahead because I'm not spending my time on her anymore. No way," Lucas said with finality, "I'm going to the Gate. I'm gonna find Will."

Lucas shoved passed both of them and they just let him go. There was going to be no convincing him at this point. And at this point, Mike didn't even care. El needed him and he needed her, so he was going to find her with or without Lucas' help.

Eleven felt bad for using her powers to steal the Eggo's from the store, but she had been so hungry and she hadn't hurt anyone, just broke a door. Plus, that man had been a mouth breather, she could tell. She had stayed out in the woods all night, and she hadn't eaten a while before they had started walking with the compasses. Her head was cold too after discarding the pretty wig earlier. What was the point? Mike was the only one that thought she was pretty and he was mad at her. He would be safer without her. That's what she kept telling herself in order to keep from going back to the fort.

The pain of her hunger paled in comparison to the pain she felt at hurting Mike. Yes, she had thrown Lucas, but only because he was going to hit Mike. She had never meant to throw him so hard. Her fear and subsequent anger had gotten the best of her and she had lost control.

And then Mike had yelled those words at her again, "*What is wrong with you?*"

Those words hurt more than anything Lucas had said about her. She had hurt his friend, so she had in turn hurt him. And she couldn't stand that, so she left and wasn't going to go back to her fort. She couldn't. For Mike.

"This is weird without Lucas," Dustin commented as they biked down the middle of the street, making their way towards Mirkwood to look for El.

"He should've shaken my hand," Mike said.

"He's just jealous," Dustin stated it as fact, but Mike had no idea what Lucas would be jealous about. He certainly hadn't said anything about being jealous.

"What're you talking about?"

"Sometimes your total obliviousness just totally blows my mind," Dustin said, "He's your best friend, right?"

"Yeah, I mean, I don't know," Mike didn't want to hurt Dustin's feelings and he definitely didn't know what to think now that Lucas was being such an asshole about El being in their party.

"It's fine. I get it. I didn't get here until the fourth grade, he had the advantage of living next door, but none of that matters. What matters is that he is your best friend and then this girl shows up and starts living in your basement and all you ever want to do is pay attention to her," Dustin spoke matter-of-factly, making Mike's eyes snap to his friend.

"That's not true," he said defensively. Of course, he liked being around El, but she didn't have anybody else. She was all alone in that basement when he wasn't around, so he was just trying to make sure she didn't get too lonely. But even Mike knew that wasn't the whole truth. If her leaving had done anything, it made him realize that maybe his feelings for El were stronger than he had been ready to admit to himself, much less anyone else. But he didn't feel like he spent any more time with her than the rest of the party.

"Yes, it is... and you know it and he knows it but no one ever says anything until you both start punching and yelling at each other like goblins with intelligence scores of zero. Now everything's weird," Dustin could always be relied upon to call them all out on their shit. It's what made him such a good friend.

"He's not my best friend," Mike argued, more adamantly this time.

"Yeah, right," Dustin said sarcastically.

"I mean he is, but so are you and so is Will," Mike edited which only prolonged the debate.

"Can't have more than one best friend."

"Says who?"

"Says logic."

"Well, I call bull on your logic 'cause you're my best friend too," Mike told him firmly, putting an end to Dustin's arguments.

"Okay," he relented, and Mike could tell that Dustin was happy to be considered his best friend too. Just as they finished, the grocery store came into view, a flurry of activity outside, forcing them to come to a halt to see what was going on.

"Whoa."

"You don't think..." Dustin began as they both stared at the shattered glass from the broken front door, and Mike just knew it was her.

"Uh, definitely."

His heartbeat picked up, knowing El had been here, and recently. So, she wasn't taken by the bad men, at least not yet. They were so close, she had to be nearby. Mike was determined to find her, even if he was out here all night.

Now, Eleven sat in the woods, eating cold Eggo's, her bare legs itching on the leaves. She had read about them in a book once, but she had no idea they were so loud and crunchy until she had escaped the lab.

The coldness of the Eggo's made her teeth ache but she was so hungry she tried to ignore it.

But then she heard it: Mike's voice, calling out for her.

"Eleven!" it wasn't too far. He was looking for her. Heart pounding, El listened intently to the sound of his voice. Dustin was there too. But she didn't hear Lucas.

For a moment, she sat there, considering whether to reveal herself. Again, she reminded herself that Mike would be safer without her.

As she was thinking this over, she realized she could no longer hear their voices. But she could sense something else. Something that made her heart race for a different reason.

Mike was in danger. She could sense it. It was as though she could feel his heart pounding in her own chest and feel his shallow, fearful breaths in her own lungs.

Scrambling to her feet, Eleven dropped her Eggo's to the ground and ran towards where she felt Mike. She couldn't hear him, but she could sense him, so she followed that feeling. It was like a magnet was pulling her to him. If this was another gift she had, it wasn't one she had ever experienced before.

As she sprinted as fast as her weakened body would allow, Eleven could feel his fear- or was it her own- constricting her heart painfully and making it difficult to fill her lungs with air. She had to get to him. And fast.

She rounded a corner and saw him. In her relief, Eleven slowed to a walk, opening her mouth to call his name, but it died in her throat as she took in the scene ahead of her.

Dustin was being held at knifepoint by the mouth breather, Troy, while the other one, she didn't know his name, stood by anxiously watching Mike, who stood dangerously close to the cliff's edge.

And then he stepped off.

Eleven wasn't even sure she had used her powers consciously, more on instinct. Either way, she halted his fall before focusing her mind and pulling him back up and over the edge. She dropped him on the ground a little harder than she intended but it had taken a lot out of

her to do even that in her weakened state and she didn't know how much more of her power she was going to need to deal with the mouth breathers. She released a deep breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding as she watched him turn to look at her, but she wasn't done.

Satisfied that Mike was safe, Eleven stepped forward, fury overtaking every other emotion as they all turned to look at her. These mouth breathers had hurt Mike before, but this time they could have killed him.

As she neared, she shoved the taller boy down with her powers, he wasn't the real threat, she just wanted to scare him and needed him out of the way.

The other mouth breather looked at her, lifting his knife. Without hesitation, she dispassionately jerked her head to the side, snapping his arm in two and making him drop the weapon. He screamed in pain, but she felt nothing. She had felt worse hurting the cat at the lab.

"She broke my arm! She broke my arm!" he cried out in disbelief and agony, using the hand on his uninjured arm to grip the broken one, staring up at her in horror.

She stopped her approach and stood threateningly in front of him, daring him to try and hurt Mike again, or anyone else for that matter.

"Go," she ordered, and they did, sprinting away as fast as they could, too scared to even look back.

Dustin seemed exceptionally pleased about what she had done because he shouted after them, "That's right! You better run! She's our friend and she's crazy! You come back here, and she'll kill you! You hear me? She'll kill you sons of bitches!"

He wasn't wrong. She was prepared to kill anyone who tried to kill Mike. If anything, she felt like she went too easy on the mouth breathers, but the last time she had used her powers to hurt someone Mike had gotten angry.

Dustin's words started to become fuzzy and the exhaustion of using so much of her power when she was already cold, hungry, and weak, had caught up to her. She could feel the edges of her vision fading to black as blood dribbled down her lip, and she could feel herself falling. She was unconscious long before her body hit the ground.

Mike watched in horror as El began to plummet to the earth. He raced over to her as fast as he could, but it wasn't fast enough. Her body hit the ground with an awful thud as he slid to his knees at her side. Blood had trickled out of both of her nostrils as well as both ears, and that was something Mike hadn't seen before. Was she more than just drained this time? Had she permanently hurt her brain? Or worse?

'El! Are you okay? El!' he called out to her, his mind still trying to process everything that had just happened. The only thing he knew for certain at this moment was that he needed her to be okay.

As her eyelids fluttered open, Mike breathed a sigh of relief. She was okay. She was here and she was okay and that's all that mattered.

"Mike," she cried, her face crumpled with tears. Mike bent down closer to her, and his fingers itched to wipe her tears away as she managed, "I'm sorry."

"Sorry? What're you sorry for?" he asked gently, if anything he was the one that was sorry. None of this would have happened if it wasn't for him. And she still came back to save him.

"The Gate... I opened it," she said it as though she was revealing a big secret, but the truth was, Mike had pretty much already figured that out. But then she added brokenly, "I'm the monster."

Mike's heart felt like it had been ripped in two as he gazed down at her, but he tried not to show it. Lucas may have called her a monster, but Mike was just as much to blame for making her think that after yelling at her. But he would never do that again. She deserved better. He would be better. For her.

"No. No, El, you're not the monster," he told her gently, but firmly,

"you saved me, understand? You *saved* me."

He wasn't sure she believed him, but he had to calm his frayed nerves and do something to remind himself that she was, in fact, really here and really okay. So, Mike took her hand, electricity shooting up his arm at the touch, and pulled her to him, hugging her tightly.

It was an awkward position but Mike didn't care. They sat there, knee to knee on the hard ground, gripping each other tightly. Mike's face was pressed into her shoulder before turning to the side so he could pull her a little closer still. His heart skipped a beat as he felt her nuzzle into his shoulder as well. He had never been this close to El and it was a weird feeling. A good feeling, but a weird one.

He thought back to her first night at his house when she had flinched away from him touching the tattoo on her arm. How far they had come in such a short time. He felt so honored that after everything, El trusted him enough to allow this embrace. It made his stomach do funny things and Mike never wanted it to end.

And then Dustin came and hugged them both. If it had been any other situation, Mike would have been extremely annoyed, but at that moment he was so relieved to be alive and have El back that he didn't care about anything else.

A/N: Woot! I'm so glad you guys liked the last chapter! It was definitely one of my favorites. This one was much tougher to write, and I added a lot of peripheral interactions to beef it up a bit, so I hope you like it even though it's still shorter than the other chapters. Thanks again for being awesome and keep letting me know how I'm doing!

7. Chapter 7: The Bathtub

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CHAPTER 7: THE BATHTUB

Eleven rode on the back of Mike's bike until the ground became too unreliable and then they, plus Dustin, walked the rest of the way to the Wheeler house. Dropping their bike's in the backyard, they all made their way inside the basement. Eleven couldn't help but pause for a moment before entering, getting the feeling that they were being watched. She wondered if the people she listened to in the Bath had that same feeling.

Internally shaking herself, Eleven strode into the basement and closed the door behind her.

Mike seemed to be acting a little differently since she had pulled him back from falling. He stayed close to her but also seemed anxious in her presence. She didn't understand it really, but she hoped she hadn't scared him by breaking the mouth breather's arm. She would never hurt Mike like that but maybe he didn't know that. He wasn't really acting afraid of her though, just nervous about something. She'd ask him about it later.

He muttered some words about cleaning her up, the pale skin of his neck flushing slightly as he led her to the basement bathroom. She didn't argue. After being outside all night and sleeping on the ground, Eleven had all but ruined the pretty dress and makeup Mike had helped her with yesterday.

They walked into the small space and Mike closed the door behind them, not locking it. Typically, she'd hate being enclosed in such a small room, really any room, but she almost completely forgot about her fear with Mike in here with her. He was safe, so he made this space feel safe too.

She watched Mike as he took a paper towel and wet it in the sink. As

he shut off the water and turned to her, Eleven couldn't help but notice how close they were in this tiny room. Mike's eyes fluttered to hers briefly before focusing on the task at hand. Eleven stood still as Mike held the paper towel close to her cheek.

"I'm going to clean your face, okay?" he said, and Eleven appreciated that he warned her, the rhythm of her heartbeat becoming erratic. It was a strange feeling, but she liked it.

She nodded her understanding and then felt the warmth from the towel as he gently wiped her cheeks. He eventually moved to her chin, forehead, and everywhere in between. She tried to ignore how good it felt, Mike's tender gesture, because she was having a hard time looking anywhere but at his dark, brown eyes.

"There. That's better," Mike said when he was done, lowering his hand to look at her.

She stared at him for a moment, before gathering the courage to look at the mirror to her right.

There she saw Eleven, not El.

A *weirdo*, she thought to herself, bringing a hand to her short, brown hair. That's all she was again, without her wig (discarded long ago), the makeup cleaned off her face, and still in the tattered pink dress.

"You don't need it," Mike told her reassuringly.

She stared at herself, unable to see anything but a stray dog as Lucas had called her. Mike didn't think that though or else he wouldn't have fought his friend. Or at least that's what she hoped.

"Still pretty?" she asked quietly, scared of the boy's answer, but still forcing herself to look into his kind eyes.

"Yeah, pretty, really pretty," he confirmed, seemingly having a hard time with the words. But Eleven knew he wasn't lying, Mike didn't lie, and she trusted him, but there was something in his voice that was shaky. Still the idea that he thought she was pretty made her heart pound hard against her ribcage and those butterflies in her stomach to return. The edge of her mouth twitched a little, trying to

hide the smile that threatened to expose how happy his statement made her.

She looked back into the mirror and stared at herself intently. She hoped she could see what he saw one day.

"El?" Mike said her name quietly, and she turned to give him her full attention.

"Yes?" she replied just as quietly, watching him intently. Mike seemed anxious, but she had no idea why. Maybe he felt the butterflies too?

"I-I'm happy you're home," he told her and it felt so good to hear him call this place her home. Her little fort in the basement had come to feel more like a home than the lab ever had. Even though it was small, it was warm and soft, nothing like the cold, hard walls and floors of the lab. But mostly this place felt like home because it's where Mike lived.

No one had ever made her feel this way before. She had lived a very different life than him, but he still tried his best to understand her and make her feel happy. He never lied to her and he protected her, even from his own friends.

"Me too," she told him honestly. This time she made sure to smile to let Mike know that she meant her words.

Then they seemed to be pulled together by a magnet. It wasn't her, she wasn't using her powers. But it felt as though they were being drawn together, closer, she wasn't sure why, but she just wanted to be closer to him.

Then, the door burst open with a loud bang, and they jumped away from one another in surprise as Dustin shouted at them,

"Guys! It's Lucas! I think he's in trouble!"

Mike had been so close to kissing El right then and there in his basement bathroom. But then Dustin had to ruin it, as usual. He had never kissed a girl or been kissed by a girl, and before he met El, the very thought kind of grossed him out. It just seemed so messy and

how did people breath? All of that was forgotten as he seemed to be pulled in her direction.

He liked her. A lot. It took her running away after he yelled at her and then still coming back to save him for Mike to really admit it to himself.

But now wasn't the time to think about this. Lucas was in trouble.

"Do you remember how he said he was looking for the Gate?" Dustin paused just long enough for Mike to answer with a 'yeah,' before continuing, "What if he found it?"

As he spoke, Dustin led him and El out of the bathroom and to the table where his Supercomm was. El sat down and Dustin yanked out the antenna, him and Mike both stood there trying to figure out what their friend was yelling.

"What's he saying?" Mike asked, frustrated he couldn't make out the muffled words.

"I don't know. He's way out of range," Dustin replied in defeat after Mike took the radio out of his hands and held it in front of his mouth. He was pretty sure he heard some choice curse words which he would've found funny if it wasn't for the fact that Mike was still annoyed with Lucas but the panic in their friend's voice was even more concerning.

"Lucas, if you can hear us, slow down. We can't understand you," Mike held the button and spoke as clearly as he could, as if that would help Lucas' voice be discernable.

"Mad hand? Does that mean anything to you? Is that like a code name or something?" Dustin was being less than helpful to say the least. But Mike hardly noticed because he had stopped breathing... he thought he heard what Lucas said but he was praying he was wrong.

Then his words came through clear, "The bad men are coming!"

"Bad men. Bad men!" Mike yelled, the realization hitting him square in the chest.

Mike's blood froze in his veins. The bad men had finally found El and they were coming to take her. Mike had just gotten her back and there was no way he was going to let those bastards get her.

"Stay here!" he told her protectively.

Even though he already knew they were coming, he and Dustin ran to the window upstairs in his bedroom. Sure enough, there was a suspicious looking utility van outside that said, Hawkins Power and Light. Mike's heart plummeted even further, down into his stomach.

"What's that guy doing?" Mike asked rhetorically, but he could see... this guy was sitting in that van, staring at his house.

"You don't think..." Dustin began, but Mike didn't have time for him to finish that sentence.

He raced to his mom who was on the phone, his breathing labored, sweat already forming on his brow.

"Mom! Mom!" yelling to get her attention, Mike was able to annoy her thoroughly because she rounded on him.

"Michael! I'm on the phone! I've told you a million times-," she reprimanded him, but he cut her off quickly. They didn't have time. El didn't have time.

"Did you schedule any repairs?" he talked over her.

"What?" she asked in confused annoyance. Mike took a calming breath, willing himself to speak slower.

"Is there anyone that's supposed to come and do repairs on the house?"

"I don't understand. Is there something wrong with the house-," she began but immediately Mike began talking over her because El's life could be at stake and he just needed to confirm that those utility trucks weren't supposed to be there.

Then Dustin came in, shouting his name. When he screamed his name a second time, Mike finally turned to look at him and Dustin's calm

voice scared him worse than if he had screamed again, "We have to leave. Right. Now."

Getting the hint, Mike ran and made to follow Dustin back down to the basement, only pausing briefly to address his mother after she shouted his name, "If anyone asks where I am, I've left the country!"

So, they sprinted down the stairs to the basement, skipping more than half the steps in their rush. His eyes landed on El's wide, fearful ones and he just knew that he couldn't allow her to be taken again. She had risked her life to escape for a reason and Mike didn't want to imagine what they'd do if they got her back.

"We have to go!" he told her, grabbing his jacket and back pack in the process. She didn't say anything as she followed them both out the basement door and to the bikes.

It was hard to run while pushing the bike, but Mike went as fast he could, El keeping pace beside him. They got to the edge of the yard and he and El got on in tandem. Mike could see the dozens of men getting out of their vans and walking towards them.

A tall, thin man with shockingly white hair and sideburns, stood in the middle staring at El with a menacing look on his face. Somehow Mike just knew this was the worst of the bad men. He could feel El tense up behind him, her hands fisting the fabric of his jacket around his middle.

A fire burned in his chest at her fear of this man; it made him feel braver. He didn't have time to be afraid, El needed him.

It was strange seeing Papa in person again. His cold eyes and thin mouth were just as she remembered them. Even though Papa's eyes were dark just like Mike's, the hollowness in them made them feel nothing like Mike's warm, kind ones.

Papa stared at her and she could feel the hold that he held over her trying to pull her back to him. But he was bad and he made her do bad things. She had Mike now. He didn't make her hurt people or only like her because she had powers. Mike made her feel like El, the

girl who could be free

"Go! Go! Go!" Dustin yelled at him, but it wasn't necessary because his foot was already on the pedals. Having the extra weight of El on the back, even though slight, made it more difficult to keep his balance in the grass, but he refused to let her fall. They had to get away. El's life depended on it. Just as she saved him, he was determined to save her.

Pedaling as fast as he dared on the uneven ground, Mike made it through the yards and steered them onto the street. Mike could hear Dustin behind him talking to Lucas on his headset and heard they were going to meet at Elm and Cherry streets. So, he altered his course slightly, cutting through driveways and back onto the street again only to hear the screeching tires and roar of engines of the bad men's vans behind them.

Dustin swore but Mike stayed focused, "This way! Come on!"

Mike led them up onto another driveway and they cut through more yards, passing through a couple of young girls minding their business and playing until Dustin screamed at them to move. They finally made it onto Elm just in time to meet up with Lucas, who looked as tired as they felt. Panting, they all paused in the middle of the street, Mike putting his foot down to steady him and El.

"Lucas!"

"Where are they?" Lucas gasped.

"I think we lost them," Dustin said breathlessly.

But again, the vans tore around the corner, speeding towards them. They biked harder than any of them thought possible, but it wasn't going to be enough. Despite all of Dustin's expletives, they were going to be caught and El was going to be taken back to the lab and hurt by the bad men, if they weren't run over by one of these vans first.

Mike refused to give up. His heart was tearing into two, knowing he

wasn't going to be strong enough to protect her. But, even as another van appeared in front of them, and they were trapped, Mike continued to pedal forward. There was nowhere else to go.

The van was closing the distance but then Mike felt El adjust behind him just slightly.

Then the van was no longer in front of them. It was catapulted off the ground and sailed over them, Mike watched it for as long as he dared, craning his neck backwards. Then, he heard the deafening crash and squealing of brakes behind him and he knew the other vans could no longer follow them either.

He and Lucas looked at each other in disbelief. El had saved them again. Mike had a feeling that Lucas was beginning to see El more like a superhero now than the weirdo he had thought she was. Mike had always thought she was the most interesting girl he had ever met, even before he knew about her powers, and he had a feeling that he would never cease to be amazed by her.

Eleven could instantly feel the familiar exhaustion that followed using her powers. She wasn't nearly as tired as she was earlier or when she had used the radio to find Will. It felt as though her powers were growing or maybe it just depended on the situation. If Mike was in danger she seemed to always be able to muster enough energy to use her powers to protect him. She wouldn't let the bad men hurt Mike or his friends, so it had been worth it. Now, she focused all of her remaining energy on not falling off the bike.

She clung to Mike's middle, forcing herself to stay awake, they weren't in the clear yet.

It felt like they were riding forever, but it probably wasn't really that long at all. Eventually, Mike pulled into the same junk yard he and Lucas had fought and she had thrown him. She gripped him a little tighter as the bike rattled beneath her on the rough ground until Mike slowed to a stop.

Mike seemed to have sensed her tiredness because he hurried off the bike, but held it firmly upright as he went around to help her off. She

instinctively reached her hands out to him and he slid his arm around her. It felt nice to be this close to him, she trusted him to not let her fall. He supported her weight as he carefully helped her sit on the ground, Mike's worried eyes only leaving her when Dustin and Lucas dropped their bikes to the ground.

"Guys! Holy shit! Did you see what she did to that van?" Dustin yelled in excitement as he approached but El was too drained to even look up at him.

"No, Dustin, we missed it," she heard Mike say, in a tone they used with each other often. She could sense he was tense, but she figured he was still nervous the bad men would find them.

The bad men... Papa... the look on his face when they had fled from him. She knew that if he ever caught them he would lock her in the dark room for days and hurt Mike, maybe even kill him. Eleven's heart constricted in fear. She would do anything to protect Mike, but would Papa look for them forever? Would she always be putting Mike in danger just by being near him? Her thoughts were interrupted once again by the boys.

"I mean, that was... that was...", Dustin was out of breath, but Lucas finished for him.

"Awesome," he said emphatically, even in his breathless state, and Eleven turned to look at him. "It was awesome."

It was the first nice thing he had said to her this whole time and she didn't know what to think. Now, he approached her and knelt down in front of her.

"Everything I said about you being a traitor and stuff," he began with effort, "I was wrong."

Eleven looked at him in confusion and disbelief. Was he finally starting to trust her?

"I'm sorry," he said finally as if it was extremely difficult. He put a hand on her shoulder in a much nicer way than he had before. It was nice. Not nice like when Mike put his hand on her shoulder, but

much nicer than when he had grabbed her before. She could sense that he really meant his apology and she wanted him to know that she felt bad too, for lying, for hurting him.

"Friends... friends don't lie," she managed even though it was difficult for her as well, "I'm sorry too."

Lucas gave her a half smile and she felt better.

"Me too," Mike said solemnly, holding out his hand to Lucas. The boy stood up, faced Mike and shook his hand, and it made Eleven happy that they were friends again.

Relief flooded Mike when Lucas finally shook his hand. As much as he had been way out of line, Lucas was still one of his best friends and he was glad that he could finally see that El was part of the party at this point.

Now that was out of the way, they could get back to finding the Gate and bringing back Will, while also keeping El from the bad men in the process. But he knew as a team they had a much better chance of success this go around.

Since Lucas had followed the compass to where they thought the Gate was, Mike and Dustin wanted to hear every detail about what he learned. So, they all crouched down in the dirt so Lucas could describe it to them. El came over as well, Mike rushing to help her. He pulled his jacket sleeve over his hand and gently wiped the dried blood from her nose. She seemed tired but not nearly as drained as he'd seen her before. But that didn't stop him from worrying about her.

As Lucas was explaining the location and layout of the building where the Gate probably was, Mike continued to watch Eleven, her stoic face revealing nothing as Lucas laid out several sticks in not quite a square.

"This is Randolph Road, right here," Lucas began, drawing a line in the dirt parallel to one of the longer sticks and then moving around the others. "The fence starts here and goes all the way around and

this is the lab right here." At that Lucas placed rusted can they had found in the middle of the square, "The Gate's gotta be in there somewhere. It's gotta be."

"But who owns Hawkins lab?" Dustin asked.

"The sign says, 'Department of Energy,'" Lucas answered.

"Department of Energy, what do you think that means?"

"It means government, military," Mike supplied, certain because it's what he'd heard his dad say all the time.

"But why's it say, 'energy'?" Dustin countered.

"Just trust me, all right? It's military, my dad's told me before," he insisted.

"Mike's right. There's soldiers out front," Lucas confirmed, and Mike felt validated. It was the first thing he and Lucas had agreed on in days.

"Do they make lightbulbs or something?"

"No. Weapons, to fight the Russians and Commies and stuff," Mike explained, repeating what his dad had told him. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw El look down for a moment, but she said nothing.

Something must have dawned on Lucas because his expression went slack in understanding before speaking, "Weapons...."

Mike's heart sank and he felt a little nauseous as he looked at El, remembering his own words to Lucas, '*She's a weapon.*'

That's why they were after her... she was their weapon for fighting the Russians. These bad men were using her for her powers, using her to hurt people. That's why she had run away. There was so much Mike wanted to ask El, so much he wanted to say to her too.

"Oh, Jesus. This is bad," Dustin's statement was extremely unhelpful.

"Really bad," Lucas agreed, glancing at all of them, one at a time,

"The place is like a fortress."

"What do we do?" Dustin's voice raising in pitch slightly at the realization of how big this was all of sudden.

"I don't know, but we can't go home. We're fugitives now," Mike surmised.

If he was honest, he was kind of worried about his family. The bad men obviously knew he had been hiding El there and Mike just hoped that they didn't think his family had anything to do with it. Luckily, none of them knew anything so maybe it would be okay.

"G-Guys... do you hear that?" It was the most useful thing Dustin had said this whole time because Mike hadn't noticed the sound of the helicopter until he mentioned it.

Eleven didn't recognize that sound, but she followed the boys' line of sight until she saw what it was too. Something big and threatening was flying towards them and, while Eleven didn't know what it was, she knew it was there for her.

The boys scrambled to get their bikes under the bus, shouting all the while for each other to hurry up. Mike urged her inside the bus as Dustin struggled with his bike and Lucas had to stop and help him. She ran up the stairs and as far back as she could, all the while her heart pounding in her chest with fear that the bad men had found her.

Mike crouched down beside her, putting himself between her and the door. She knew he was trying to protect her but if the bad men did come for her, she would be the one protecting him. He was too good to get hurt because of her.

They relaxed only a little as they realized the helicopter obviously hadn't spotted them, but their nerves shot right back up when they heard the crackle of Mike's Supercomm.

"Mike, are you there? Mike?" Mike recognized that voice almost

immediately.

"You guys hear that?" Dustin asked as if they were all deaf.

Mike shot up from his place beside El and ran to his backpack, pulling the radio out of it so he could hear it more clearly. They all huddled around him and El tossed the backpack out of the way.

"Mike? It's me, Nancy. Mike, are you there? You need to answer," his sister continued, over and over.

"Is that you're sister?" Lucas asked in disbelief and Mike was still so surprised that he couldn't formulate a response.

"This is an emergency, Mike. Do you copy? Mike, do you copy?"

"Okay this is really weird," Dustin stated, but then Lucas tried to grab the radio out of Mike's hands but he snatched it right back.

"Don't answer!"

"She said it was an emergency!"

"What if it's a trick?"

"It's your sister!"

"What if the bad people kidnapped her? What if they're forcing her to say this?" Mike argued, thinking of all of the possible scenarios. It just wasn't like his sister to contact him on the Supercomm, it didn't feel quite right.

"We need you to answer," Nancy continued.

"Like Lando Calrissian...don't answer," Dustin could always be counted on for Star Wars references. As they debated about whether it was a trap, the Chief's voice replaced his sister's, freaking them out further.

"Listen, kid. This is the Chief. If you're there pick up. We know you're in trouble and we know about the girl."

"Why is she with the Chief?" Lucas' voice reflected Mike's own confusion.

"How the hell does he know about...," Dustin asked what they were all thinking, glancing over at El.

"We can protect you, we can help you, but you gotta pick up. Are you there? Do you copy? Over." Mike could hear the impatience in the Chief's voice grow as he said this. Mike had to appreciate that he actually used the proper protocol though and said 'over' when he was done talking.

Mike glanced at each of his friends in turn and then El, who looked away, hands coming to rest in her lap. He could tell she was anxious, but he just knew the Chief could help them. They couldn't stay hidden in this bus forever.

"Yes, I copy. It's Mike. I'm here," he looked side to side at his friends, "We're here."

Eleven wasn't sure what to think. She didn't know Mike's sister or the man they called the Chief. But Mike seemed to trust them and if he trusted them then she would too.

She remained silent, merely listening as Mike revealed their location to the Chief and then they waited. And waited.

That sound had gone away but the boys were still worried that the bad men would find them here. They relaxed a little though and Mike suggested she sit on one of the few soft seats there was in there. It was much more comfortable than the floor but she felt a little bad because Mike looking like he was sitting on something much less comfortable.

Lucas sat on one of the nice seats too but Dustin wouldn't sit. The curly haired boy walked back and forth up the middle so many times that Eleven was starting to get nauseous watching him. Mike must have too because he yelled, "Will you stop pacing?"

"It's been way too long. You know maybe you're right, maybe this is

all a trap and the bad men are coming to get us right now!" Dustin yelled back, continuing his motions.

"It's not a trap! Why would the Chief set us up? Nancy, maybe, but the Chief?" Lucas contested, which must have annoyed Mike because he threw up his hands and gave his friend a strange look.

"Lando Calrissian," Dustin said and Eleven had no idea what he was talking about. It sounded like a name, she guessed, but it meant nothing to her.

"Would you shut up about Lando!"

"I don't feel good about this! I DON'T FEEL GOOD ABOUT THIS!"

"WHEN DO YOU FEEL GOOD ABOUT ANYTHING?" Lucas yelled back just as angrily, but still not getting up from his seat.

In the break between their shouting, Eleven heard it. The sound of cars. The others heard it too because they all ran to the front where the windows were, Eleven moving to the front.

Her breath caught in her throat, she knew those cars... she had seen them when the bad men had been at that nice man's restaurant, the man they killed. And now they were here to take her and hurt her friends.

'Shit,' this was the only thought Mike's brain could process at the moment as he saw the black cars pull into the junkyard from all sides. Dustin said exactly what he had been thinking out loud, which broke Mike from the spell.

He realized El was standing the closest to the window, the easiest to see, the easiest to target. So, Mike ushered her into the furthest corner of the bus, again. He had no delusions that he could take on several full grown, military men with guns, but he hoped that maybe if he was between her and the bad men at the very least he could buy her some time to use her powers or get away.

"Lando," Dustin whispered, again not helpful.

"You think they saw us?" Lucas asked anxiously, his eyes wide with fear. Any doubts he had about the level of danger El had been trying to escape from was probably gone at this point.

"Both of you shut up," Mike growled. If they were the reason El was discovered he'd never forgive them. Mike's was trying hard not to even breath too loudly, in fear they'd be found.

Mike's heart stopped as he heard the door to the bus squeak open. It was quickly followed by several thuds and a groan. Someone made their way up into the bus and they all stood in unison to see Chief Hopper, breathless but nonchalant. They stared at him shock as he said, "All right. Let's go." When none of them moved out of their frozen state, he raised his voice, "Let's go!"

Startled, they all grabbed their things and ran out of the bus quickly. Mike finally able to breath knowing the bad men hadn't gotten El, yet.

They rode in the Chief's truck, Eleven between Mike and Lucas and Dustin in front with the Chief. She tried to hide her nervousness. She had never been in a truck before and it was moving very fast. It was so dark outside that she had a hard time believing the Chief could really see where he was going but she said nothing, just gripped the edge of the seat.

Her nails dug into the smooth surface as they turned a corner sharply. The momentum pushed Mike's shoulder into hers slightly and he gave her a sideways look as if to apologize. But his eyes stayed on her and he must have noticed her fear, despite her best efforts to keep it hidden because she felt his hand slide on top of hers. It was warm and soothing, and she could feel her fear easing just a bit as Mike smiled reassuringly back at her. She relaxed her fingers at his touch, loosening her death-grip on the seat, and instead, flipping her hand over in his and interlacing their fingers. She smiled back at him and even in the darkness she could see his face reddening a little, but he never let go of her hand the rest of the ride.

She was a little disappointed when the ride was over and they separated to get out of the truck because Mike let go of her hand. She

recognized that they were where Will had been hiding. She sensed him nearby but not here though. She followed Mike as they all stepped out and towards the house. Eleven saw three people walk out of the doors, a girl older than herself that she recognized as Mike's sister from the pictures he showed her in the house, an older woman, and a boy older than Mike.

Eleven didn't have long to study these new people because Nancy was running at Mike saying, "Mike! Oh, my God, Mike!"

She pulled him into a quick hug, before pulling away and holding him at arm's length to look at him, reprimanding, "I was so worried about you."

This must not be normal behavior for his sister because Mike looked unsure.

"Uh, me too," he sounded a little robotic.

Then, Nancy seemed to notice her for the first time, looking over Mike's shoulder at her. Mike turned to look at her too.

"Is that my dress?" Nancy asked, bewildered and Eleven had no idea how she should respond. She had a feeling this had been hers but Dustin and Lucas had been the ones to give it to her, so it wasn't stealing. But she looked around at her friends for help but it was the Chief who spoke,

"We should go inside. There's a lot to talk about."

Nancy and Jonathan explained everything they knew first (which Mike thought was weird that they were hanging out all of sudden but he decided not to say anything). But Nancy talked about trying to find Barb and the monster and crawling through the tree and Mike felt a little guilty that he had no idea this was all going on with his sister. They both were essentially going through the same thing, but they hadn't talked to each other about it, so neither of them knew.

Then it was their turn to tell their story.

"So, in this example we're the acrobat and Will and Barbara and the

monster, they're this flea and this is the Upside Down, where Will is hiding. Mr. Clarke said the only way to get there is through a rip in time and space," Mike told them, pointing at the drawing he made to illustrate it the way Mr. Clarke had done for them.

"A Gate," Dustin clarified.

"That we tracked to Hawkins Lab," Lucas added his piece too.

"With our compasses," Dustin saw the confusion on Mrs. Byers' face so he elaborated, "Okay, so the Gate has a really strong electromagnetic field and that can change the direction of a compass' needle."

"This Gate underground?"

The Chief had remained mostly quiet this entire time, so when he spoke they all looked over at him in surprise. But Mike was even more surprised when El responded to him,

"Yes."

"Near a large water tank?" the Chief asked and again El replied,

"Yes."

Mike watched this interaction in astonishment. He could see El was uncomfortable, looking away from the Chief, who seemed to be giving her an odd look. But Mike was hung up on how he could have guessed that..

"How-How do you know all that?" Dustin asked in disbelief, as if reading Mike's mind.

"He's seen it," Mike answered for him, as the comprehension dawned on him. That was the only way he could have known.

"Is there anyway you could reach Will? That you could talk to him in this...," Mrs. Byers spoke, and Mike could hear the hope in her voice as she addressed El.

"The Upside Down," El's voice was just above a whisper, as Mike had come to know was her norm, but she looked even more apprehensive

than usual.

"Upside Down, yeah," Mrs. Byers repeated, uncertainly and El merely nodded.

"And my friend, Barbara... Could you find her too?" Nancy asked, just as hopeful as Mrs. Byers.

Mike watched El's face carefully as she remained stoic, but he could just tell she was not anxious to do this. Mike just hoped she knew she had a choice here. He wouldn't think any less of her if she decided not to do it, that it was too risky. His hand itched to hold hers, to comfort her, to let her know everything would be okay.

Eleven sat at the dining room table with the Supercomm in front of her. Mike tuned the dials to the best channel, the staticky noise coming through.

She closed her eyes to concentrate, but she could still feel the eyes of everyone in the room on her. Not only that, but she could feel their hope and fear and anxiety, all their focus on her. Mike was sitting beside her, and she could sense he was trying to put her at ease, even though he wasn't saying anything. His presence next to her was enough.

As hard as she tried, Eleven couldn't get there; she wasn't strong enough. The lights flickered as she opened her eyes. She could see the expectant looks on all of their faces and she hated herself. Whenever she couldn't do as Papa asked in the lab, he would punish her by locking her in the dark room. She didn't think anyone here would do that to her but she felt bad because she wanted so badly to help them and she failed.

The back of her eyes burned as she felt herself getting upset. Eleven whispered to them on the verge of tears, "I'm sorry."

"W-what's wrong? Wha-what happened?" Mrs. Byers stuttered holding the Chief's hand over her shoulder, clearly worried about Will and what she had seen, if anything.

"I-I can't find them," El struggled to piece those words together. Her words made Mrs. Byers sad and Eleven felt like she needed to be away from all of their eyes for a moment. It was so much pressure, even without the fear of being locked in a dark room.

She felt so ashamed that they had placed all their hopes on her and she couldn't do it. Guilt ate at her too, because the whole reason they were all missing these two people was because she opened the Gate, and now, she couldn't even fix her own mistake. It felt awful.

She caught Mike's gaze briefly and she could only see kindness and concern in his brown eyes. He didn't seem to blame her but maybe he should. She didn't deserve his niceness. But Mike came to her rescue anyway.

"Hey, you need a minute?" he suggested, pushing himself up and away from the table and making his way over to her.

"Bathroom?" she asked, hoping that if Mike's basement had one, then this house had one as well. Mike nodded, and she stood up, so he could lead her down the hall to the small room, all the while trying to hold back her tears, but Mike noticed. He always noticed.

He paused next to the bathroom door and took her hand in his, drawing her eyes to him.

"El, everything's gonna be okay, you know," Mike tried to reassure her, but the truth was, she didn't know if she believed him. Everyone put so much faith in her and she truthfully didn't know if she could do it.

But Mike's dark eyes stared deeply into hers and they told her that he didn't expect anything from her. He just wanted her to be okay and that made her want to cry more. She knew he wanted to find his friend and yet he still wouldn't use her like Papa. He was too good. Too good for a girl named Eleven.

She nodded slightly in response and Mike gave her a kind smile, before giving her some privacy as he called it.

She closed the door and turned the water on in the sink. It was

different than Mike's bathroom but similar enough for her to figure out. It was weird being able to go to the bathroom whenever she liked in privacy. At the lab, she had to wait until the guards let her go to the bathroom, holding it all night sometimes.

Holding her hands under the water, Eleven let the water run over them and looked at herself in the mirror. Tears streamed down her face in disappointment with herself. If Will and Barb died in the Upside Down, it would be her fault because she was the one who opened the Gate and let the monster out. And she will fail Mike.

Eleven didn't want to see her tears anymore, so she brought the water to her face, wiping more wetness on her face to cover them up. It didn't make her feel any better.

As she lowered her hands slowly from her cheeks and turned off the water, Eleven's eyes caught sight of something behind her in the mirror... a bathtub. She had a bath at the lab, where she could always find who she was looking for so easily. Maybe she could do it if they made one like it?

A glimmer of hope flickered in her chest, that maybe she could still fix this.

Mike returned to the Byers' kitchen to address the group. He felt the need to explain why he thought El couldn't find them.

Mike had studied her face as she closed her eyes, focusing, and he wished he could do something to make all of this easier on her. He couldn't imagine what it must be like with a room full of people watching you try to find their loved ones, counting on you. Mike had wanted so badly to walk over to her and wrap his arms around her and tell her it was okay.

"Whenever she uses her powers she gets weak," Mike told the group.

"The more energy she uses, the more tired she gets," Dustin further explained.

"Like, she flipped the van earlier," Lucas told them.

"It was awesome," Dustin couldn't help himself.

"But she's drained," Mike's heart fluttered a little as he remembered how she had looked when she had found Will with the Heathkit, how she had barely been able to stay conscious. She wasn't that drained now, but he never wanted to see her like that again. It had scared him more than he cared to admit.

"Like a bad battery." Mike gave them a look; he wasn't really a fan of comparing El to inanimate objects. She was a person with feelings and he just felt like the other two always unintentionally dehumanized her when they did that, but he just tried to ignore it for now.

"How-How do we make her better?" Mrs. Byers asked, desperate to find Will.

"We don't. We just have to wait and try again," Mike told her. As much as he wanted to find Will, he wasn't about to sacrifice El to accomplish that.

"How long?" Nancy was impatient, and Mike understood but El needed time.

"I don't know," he answered honestly.

El's soft voice startled them all, "The bath." They hadn't heard her come in, but all of their eyes were on her now, "I can find them... in the bath."

Eleven could see the hope return to their eyes and it felt good. The Chief had seen her tank at the lab and understood what kind of bath she was talking about, thankfully. So, she listened as Dustin called Mr. Clarke on the phone, as Mike called it, and became determined when they all figured they could make the bath for her.

Again, it require getting in the truck, so they could all go to Mike's school, apparently this was where the salt was and the best place to make the bath. As they all piled into the cars, Eleven made sure to sit by Mike.

They all had their marching orders. The Chief and Jonathan were going to get the salt, Lucas and Dustin were going to set up the kiddie pool in the gym, Mrs. Byers was helping El get ready (the job Mike had wanted), and he and Nancy were getting the hoses from the school shed.

His sister tried the door, but it was locked. When she stepped away, Mike gave it a hard shove with his shoulder which only hurt himself but did nothing to hurt the door.

"Stand back," Nancy ordered, and Mike watched in amazement as she used a rock to hit the lock with expert precision, take it off, and kick the door open. Since when did his sister become such a badass?

They gathered all the hoses that were in there, Nancy pushing a wheelbarrow full of them, Mike carrying a couple on his shoulder. He and his sister hadn't really talked the whole time, but out of the blue she asked, "What does she even eat?"

"What?" Mike asked, not following.

"Eleven," Nancy clarified, and Mike could have slapped himself for his stupidity. Duh, of course she was talking about El.

"Uh, candy, leftovers, Eggo's" Mike listed, then adding fondly, "She really likes Eggo's."

"I knew you were acting weird. I just thought it was because of Will," Nancy said, softly and Mike felt a little bad for not talking to his sister about it. But she had been kind of a jerk lately. Then again, he wasn't really the best brother in the world either.

"I knew you were acting weird too but I thought it was because of Steve," Mike countered honestly.

All of sudden Mike heard the thud of Nancy setting the wheelbarrow down, and he turned to her as she said, "Hey, no more secrets, okay? From now on we tell each other everything."

Mike saw this as his opportunity and asked, "Okay, do you like Jonathan now?"

Nancy's eyes narrowed for a second.

"What? No...No, it's not like that," Nancy responded, averting her gaze for a second. Mike didn't know if he really believed that or not, but he just nodded his head. "Do you like Eleven?"

Mike should have seen that coming, but it took him completely off guard. His reaction was immediate and a complete lie. He wasn't prepared to be *that* honest with his sister, that vulnerable.

"What? No! Ew, gross!" he said with as much disgust as he could muster. Whatever he did feel for El it was his. There was no way he was going to talk about his feelings for El with his sister. So much for telling each other everything.

Eleven watched Mrs. Byers going through cabinets from her seat across the room. She was starting to get nervous. The last time she had been in the bath she had opened the Gate, what other horrors would she inflict if she got scared again?

She wished Mike was here. Mrs. Byers was nice but she liked Mike best.

"This will keep it dark for you, just like in your bath," Mrs. Byers told her as she sat down across from her with something to go over her eyes.

"You're a very brave girl. You know that don't you?" El looked away from Will's mom. She didn't like it when adults were too nice to her. She was afraid they were like Papa and only were nice to her when she hurt people. But in her heart, Eleven knew that Will's mom wasn't anything like Papa, she just wanted to bring her son home, so Eleven looked back at her. "Everything you're doing for my boy... for Will... for my family. Thank you."

Eleven didn't feel worthy of her gratitude. She was the sole reason Will was gone in the first place, so really all she was trying to do was fix a mistake she made.

When Mrs. Byers took her hands in both of hers, Eleven's first instinct

was to pull away, but she stared down at their hands, forcing them to stay. She wasn't going to hurt her, she knew that, but it was still hard to fight that reflex. The only person who she didn't flinch away from anymore was Mike. His touch was nice.

"Listen. I'm gonna be there with you the whole time and if it gets too scary in that place, you just let me know, okay?" Will's mom assured her and Eleven felt some comfort.

"Yes," she replied. And after a moment, Mrs. Byers asked her, "Ready?"

Eleven felt like she may never be ready to go into the bath again but she responded, with difficulty, "Ready."

Mike watched her walk towards him in the middle of the gym. His palms were sweaty and his heart was having trouble finding a comfortable rhythm as she came to stand next to him. Just like before when she used her powers to find Will with the Heathkit, Mike felt the sudden urge to call the whole thing off. They could find another way to find Will, one that didn't involve El potentially getting hurt. The image of her pale, semi-conscious face kept appearing before his eyes, and he was terrified that one of these times using her powers would be too much for her. There had to be a reason there was always blood dripping from her nose and ears. Mike wondered if using her powers hurt; he had never even thought to ask her.

It all just didn't seem fair. She didn't deserve this. She hadn't intentionally opened the Gate. If the bad men had never kept her locked away as their little lab rat this never would have happened. She was no monster and yet she was expected to fight one.

All of this he kept to himself as he stood next to her as she got ready. She took off her socks before removing his watch from her wrist and handing it back to him without looking at him. That was probably a good thing because he would have tried to convince her not to do this, so instead he just strapped the watch back on to his own wrist.

Mike walked around to the side of the pool, took a seat, and watched in silence as the Chief and Mrs. Byers helped El into the water. She

laid down and stretched her arms and legs out, floating in the shallow pool.

Almost immediately, the power flickered off and he knew she was there, in that place inside her mind.

Eleven opened her eyes and she was there. Anxious to do this as quick as possible in case the monster found her, so she pictured Barbara's face and focused.

Ahead of her appeared the body of a person on the black, watery ground.

Her heart pounded and her chest heaved as she tried to breath against the terror gripping her. And Eleven knew. She could feel it.

But as she neared, Barbara's face came into view, a slug of some kind slithering out of her mouth.

Eleven backed away in horror, hardly aware she was screaming, "Gone!" over and over again.

The lights flickered again before going completely out.

"What's going on?" Nancy asked him anxiously as if he could see what El was seeing.

"I don't know," he insisted, turning his gaze back to El. He could tell she was getting upset and it was making his pulse race. What if she was in danger? What if the Demogorgon got her too?

"Is Barb okay? Is she okay?" Nancy called out to Eleven, but she couldn't hear her.

"Gone! Gone! Gone!" El began repeating and Mike's stomach clenched. She was in obvious distress and all he wanted to do was pull her out that pool and hold her and tell her it was okay. But he forced himself to stay put, his fists clenched so hard his fingernails were cutting into his palms.

The Chief and Mrs. Byers were on either side of El and took her hands, trying to comfort her. It seemed to work because El slowly relaxed, the water settling around her and Mike was finally able to release a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding.

"It's okay...I've got you...Don't be afraid... I'm right here with you," Eleven heard these words echoing around her and it calmed her somewhat. She wasn't used to that while in this place. That's not something Papa did.

Barbara was gone. Eleven was alone again. So, she took a calming breath, closing her eyes. Next, she focused on Will. Castle Byers appearing as her eyelids fluttered open. She slowly made her way towards it, afraid of what she would find inside.

As she pushed back the fabric door, Eleven held her breath, but there was Will, alive, but just barely. She whispered to him, "Will."

The people outside must have heard it because she could hear Will's mom talking to her, so she relayed her message.

"Your mom, she's coming for you," Eleven told him, holding his cold hand in hers in an attempt to comfort the boy.

"Hurry," he said weakly in response.

"Just hold on a little longer, Will," she relayed again, but then Castle Byers began disappearing like smoke all around her. Her heart raced and she was filled with confusion; what was happening? She looked down at Will and he too vanished into thin air.

"Will? Will! Will!" she screamed, frantically looking around her for him.

What had she done? Where did he go? Was she too late to save him?

In the Right-Side Up, she ripped the mask off her face, pulling herself out of that place, something she could never do in the tank at the lab. Immediately, she was wrapped up in Mrs. Byers arms as she gasped for air around her distraught sobs.

She couldn't save him. She found him but then she lost him. This was all her fault.

Eleven didn't understand. Why was Mrs. Byers not angry with her? Tears streamed down her face as she let Mrs. Byers hold her. She didn't understand but it made her feel just a little better.

If Mike hadn't seen her do something like this before, he wouldn't have believed it. El had found him again. To hear Will's voice again over the Supercomm was a relief; that meant he was still alive.

But then something scared El. His eyes were fixed on her and he could see her body tense up as she began to say Will's name over and over.

Then, she sat up suddenly in the pool, ripping the goggles on her eyes, gasping for air with horror etched all over her face. Instantly, Mike made a move to stand up and go to her, but Mrs. Byers had her in her arms almost immediately.

His heart ached as he watched her sob into Mrs. Byers' shoulder, wishing he could take away all her pain. As much as he wanted to go over there and comfort her, he could see that maybe what she needed right now was a mom. So, as hard as it was to just sit there and watch her cry, Mike told himself he would be patient. He would be here for her when she needed him.

Eleven wasn't sure how long she sat there in the pool and cried but eventually her breathing calmed and her tears slowed. Mrs. Byers and the Chief helped her out of the pool, she was weak from using so much of her power and emotionally hollow from what she had seen.

As soon as she was out of the pool, Mike was by her side. His arm around her waist as he guided her over to the benches and gently helped her to sit so she could rest.

She was so exhausted and cold. She wasn't sure if she said this out loud or not but Mike knew either way and kneeled in front of her, helping her put her socks back on before coming to sit next to her. He

tenderly wiped the blood from her nose and ears with a towel, and even in her tiredness she could feel his anxiety.

After everything she had just seen, Eleven needed Mike's closeness, so she rested her head on his shoulder, leaning into his side. She was peripherally aware that Lucas put a towel around her and Dustin put a comforting hand on her knee, but Mike's warmth was all she really wanted or needed right now, so she nuzzled her face further into his neck, letting herself feel safe if only for a moment.

A/N: Whew, so this chapter went from being 4 pages to 19... Hope you all like it because it was definitely a challenge due to all the build up for the final episode. Let me know what you guys think! And never fear! I'm gearing up for writing season 2!

8. Chapter 8: The Upside Down

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CHAPTER 8: THE UPSIDE DOWN

To say Mike was getting anxious would have been an understatement. It had been way too long. Nancy and Jonathan should have come back by now. The only thing that was keeping him even remotely calm was the slight weight of El's head resting on his shoulder.

At first, she had been so cold pressed against his side, but eventually between the towel and his body heat she seemed to have warmed up. He had been so worried about her when she had initially gotten out of the pool, shivering, her eyes haunted by whatever she had seen in that place inside her mind. Having no idea what to say to make her feel better, Mike just sat next to her, hoping their contact was enough to ease her fear, if only a little.

Normally, it would have made him nervous to have a girl this close to him but El was different. He really cared about her and all he wanted was for her to be okay. She deserved it after everything she had been through.

There was something about the atmosphere around them; Mike could feel this was leading to something big, he just didn't know how. In the meantime, he knew El needed rest, especially after using her powers to find Will in the pool. Eventually though, he knew Nancy and Jonathan had been gone too long. He anxiously glanced towards the doors for what felt like the millionth time, El's short brown hair tickling his cheek.

So, without warning he stood and raced out of the gym, calling his sister and Jonathan's names. His eyes scanning the darkness for any sign of the two. Something didn't feel right.

He strode back in purposefully, approaching the guys and El where

they had remained seated on the bleachers.

"They're gone," Mike said breathlessly.

"What?" Lucas asked, confused.

"Nancy and Jonathan, his car is gone."

"They're probably just sucking face somewhere," Dustin suggested unhelpfully. Mike couldn't stop the look of disgust from wrinkling his face. Lucas could be heard saying, 'gross,' but Mike tried to stay focused while he did his best to get that image out of his head.

"No, no way."

"Did they go with the Chief?" Dustin offered up.

"I don't know," Mike could hear his voice rise defensively but he couldn't help it, he was actually kind of worried about his big sister. He had this feeling that her and Jonathan were off doing something stupid.

"No." El said simply and all eyes snapped to her.

"What?" he asked incredulously, not really mad at her for not saying anything, but just anxious to know where his sister had gone. "Did you see them? Do you know where they went?"

"Yes."

"Where? Where did they go?"

El's soft brown eyes never left his, glancing sideways at him. She seemed reluctant to tell him and fighting an internal battle. Eventually she spoke quietly but there was no mistaking her word.

"Demogorgon." It was the first time El had actually called the monster that, but Mike was too focused on the fact that his worst fears were confirmed: his sister had gone to fight the monster that killed Barb and took Will.

Mike didn't know what but he knew they had to do something.

Eleven sat sideways on the bleachers, hugging her knees to her chest and resting her chin on them. She had discarded the towel and sat wearing the shirt the Chief apparently gave her when she had gotten out of the pool over Nancy's slowly drying dress.

She listened intently to the boys' debate, secretly regretting telling Mike that his sister and Will's brother had left to find the Demogorgon. She regretted it because Mike is a good brother. He wants to help, but that will put him in danger. Eleven had already decided that if it comes to it, she will do anything to protect Mike. Anything.

"Guys, Guys! This is crazy. We can't just wait around," Mike argued passionately.

"Mike, in case you forgot, we're still fugitives. The bad men are still looking for us," Lucas reminded him, unnecessarily.

"Yeah, and we don't even know where your sister is," Dustin added.

Eleven was hoping they would talk Mike out of doing something that could get him hurt, but she couldn't help but admire his bravery. It was one of the many reasons she liked him best.

"El can find them," Mike suggested, and it was true. She could and she would do anything if Mike asked her to, but she turned her head away to rest her cheek on her knees, hoping Mike wouldn't ask her to put him in danger.

"Mike, look at her!" but at Dustin's words she turned her head to them, not understanding his point. Mike's eyes met hers and she saw he was worried about her and felt bad about suggesting she use her powers again. "I think we should still stick to the Chief's plan."

"Exactly. We stay here, keep El out of sight, and keep her safe. That's the most important thing, remember?" Lucas agreed, apparently leaving no room for debate, "Besides, she's okay. She's with Jonathan."

"Yeah, and she's kind of a badass now, so...", Dustin finished, turning

to walk away. Eleven lifted her head to watch his retreat, wondering what, 'badass' meant.

"Where are you going? You just said stick to the plan!" Mike yelled after him.

"I am! I'm just gonna go get some chocolate pudding! I'm telling you, lunch lady Phyllis hoards that shit!" he called over his shoulder, most of which Eleven didn't understand.

"Are you serious?!" Mike shouted after him in disbelief and she wondered at his strong reaction. Was chocolate put-ting a bad thing?

"El needs to be recharged," he insisted, so she stood from the bleachers at the sound of her name, but she stopped when she saw Mike wasn't following Dustin or Lucas out of the gym.

So, she and Mike were left alone. Together.

Sensing El's presence behind him, Mike turned to look at her. Lucas and Dustin were right of course: she still looked drained with her shoulders slumped and her skin a shade paler than usual.

He sighed in defeat and gestured to her that they should follow the other two to the cafeteria. He didn't really want El to overdo it, so he suggested they sit at the table that the Party usually sat at, enjoying that he could show her their school even in these dire circumstances.

Mike couldn't help feeling this was the calm before the storm, but for now he'd enjoy this semi-alone time with El.

He opened his mouth to speak but Dustin screamed from the back that he'd found the chocolate pudding. He mentally rolled his eyes at his friend after he shouted back in confirmation. Then he turned his full attention back to the girl in front of him.

"Are you feeling any better?" he asked gently. He kind of felt bad earlier for suggesting she use her powers to help him find Nancy and Jonathan. Despite the other two's reassurances, he had this nagging feeling that they were getting themselves into trouble. But for now, he'd focus on keeping El safe.

At his question, she looked blankly at him for a moment as if considering her answer before averting her eyes and shrugging slightly. He was a little disappointed, mostly because he wanted her to be okay and have energy if anything were to happen and he couldn't protect her. But she looked back at him, her brown eyes inquisitive.

"What is... put-ting?" she asked, struggling to pronounce the word she had obviously never heard before until tonight. Sometimes it really hit Mike that she had lived a life where she had missed so many basic things a kid should have experienced.

"Pudding. It's this chocolate goo you eat with a spoon," he explained, patiently. Trying to not laugh at her grossed out expression, Mike thought he may have explained that better. But he tried to reassure her regardless. "Don't worry. After all this is over you won't have to keep eating junk food and leftovers like a dog anymore. My mom... she's a pretty awesome cook, she can make you whatever you like."

"Eggo's?" El asked hopefully and he smiled slightly at her expression.

"Well, yeah, Eggo's but real food too," Mike confirmed and then he considered his next words, ultimately deciding to just speak them.

"See, I was thinking, once all this is over and Will's back and you're not a secret anymore, my parents could get you an actual bed for the basement. Or you can take my room if you want since I'm down there all the time anyways," Mike paused, hoping he hadn't scared her with all his grand plans but continuing nonetheless, "My point is they'll take care of you. They'll be like your new parents and Nancy, she'll be like your new sister."

El seemed to listen to him intently as he spoke and if Mike wasn't mistaken, he thought he could see the faintest of smiles on her lips.

"Will you be like my brother?" she asked, and Mike hadn't seen that coming, but his reaction was immediate and strong.

"What? No. No," he said vehemently, and he just knew the expression on his face must have betrayed his disgust.

He couldn't help it. Mike liked El; really, really liked her. And not in the friend kind of way, and definitely not in the sibling kind of way. He liked her in the way where he felt like he had to protect her, where he only felt like he could be happy if she was smiling back at him, where his heart felt like it was being stretched painfully away from him whenever she wasn't around. He needed her. And he had no idea how to explain all that to someone who had been raised by bad men in a lab, someone who had never had any siblings or even been allowed to have friends much less anything more.

"Why, no?" she asked seriously, her brow furrowed slightly in confusion.

"Because..." Mike thought hard, looking away to gather his thoughts for a moment, aware of those brown eyes staring at him, waiting for an answer, so he said lamely, "Because it's different."

"Why?" she repeated, and Mike knew she wasn't going to let this go. And maybe, secretly he didn't want her to. Sure, this was going to be awkward as hell and it made him feel vulnerable and scared and weird, but he also wanted her to know.

But he also knew she probably didn't feel the same way. She probably *did* see him like a brother.

"I mean, I don't know. I guess it's not. It's stupid," he said defeatedly. He couldn't look at her anymore. It hurt too much. He wanted so badly for those eyes to see him the way he saw her. As maybe, someone who could maybe be her boyfriend. But he knew it wasn't possible, he was being dumb. What made him think he a girl he liked could live in his house?

"Mike," he heard her say, and he could never seem to deny her, so he looked up, hopefully.

"Yeah?"

"Friends don't lie," she said firmly, using her favorite phrase he had taught her. It would have made him smile to hear her say it again if he wasn't so unbelievably nervous at the moment.

It was getting warm in here. Mike's palms were sweating, his heart racing in his chest. It felt as though there was heat creeping up his neck, but he wanted to tell her, had to tell her. If something big did happen tonight, he at least wanted her to know how he felt about her.

He had been thinking about how to ask her out since she saved his life at the quarry. He knew he had liked her before that but something had changed that day. Mike knew he had to find the courage to ask her out and when they got to the school tonight his mind immediately went to the Snow Ball in about a month they'd be having in that very gym. Once he had the idea in his head, Mike couldn't shake it so this was it.

"Well- uh- I was thinking, I don't know. Maybe we can go to the Snow Ball together," he bumbled around his words, only daring to meet her gaze at the end, but her eyes were still confused.

"Snowball?" she asked for clarification and he mentally slapped himself. Of course, she had no idea what he was talking about. So, while he was over here freaking out, she truly didn't understand what he was trying to ask her.

"It's this cheesy school dance where you go in the gym and dance to music and stuff. I've never been but I know you're not supposed to go with your sister," Mike explained, and something about the explaining calmed his nerves a little.

"No?" she asked. El's expression was serious as usual but she seemed to be listening to him with rapt attention, determined to understand what he was saying.

"I mean, you can but it'd be really weird," Mike tried again and noted how she looked away briefly. He could tell she was getting frustrated with being unable to understand what he was saying so he tried to be more direct. "You go to school dances with someone that you, you know, someone that you like."

There he'd said it. He told El that he liked her.

"A friend?" she attempted, looking as though she had finally solved it.

Mike's heart sunk. He really thought he had done it that time. His heart didn't know if he could take all this. Every sentence felt like a revelation but El had no idea the inner turmoil going through him right now.

He sighed heavily, grasping for any other way to get his point across to her.

"Not a friend, uh, someone like uh..." he struggled, watching her brown eyes narrow as if trying to figure out on his facial expressions alone. Then, Mike knew what he had to do, what he wanted to do this entire time.

He practically lunged forward in his rush, afraid he would lose his nerve. But Mike did it. Mike kissed El.

He pressed his lips against hers and she didn't back away. When his lips collided clumsily with hers, Mike felt a bolt of electricity shoot through him. It was the most amazing thing he had ever felt.

It definitely wasn't the most romantic kiss in the world, but it was his first. It had to be hers too.

He leaned back into his seat quickly to see her reaction. Her shocked expression worried him for a second. Was that the wrong thing to do? Had he scared her? Had he royally screwed up? He should have asked her. He definitely should have asked her first.

Her chocolate brown eyes stayed wide in surprise, but slowly the edges of her lips curved into a astonished smile.

Relief flooded through him, and he finally felt like he could breath again. His lips were still tingling but they formed into his own content smile.

He, Michael Wheeler, had kissed a girl. Not just any girl, but El, the most amazing, beautiful, powerful, kind girl he had ever met. And damn if Mike wasn't proud of himself.

The sound of a car pulling up and head lights flashing through the windows grabbed their attention.

"Nancy!" he said.

It had to be Nancy and Jonathan... And as much as Mike wanted to stay with El, he needed to know his sister was all right, so he jumped up from the table. He placed a hand on El's shoulder as he passed, telling her,

"Hold on, I'll be right back. Stay here."

Eleven's mind was still reeling as she watched Mike run past her. Her lips still tingled from when he pressed his there. She wasn't sure what to call that, but she had liked it. A lot.

She had been listening to him intently, she loved hearing him talk, and she especially enjoyed the future he had planned for the both of them. She could almost imagine it: a bed like the one Mike had except in the basement and maybe they could make the fort bigger to go around it. She could come upstairs and eat her Eggo's at the table Mike had showed her with his sisters and his parents, and they would be her sisters and her parents.

The very idea of it made her heart swell, but she had learned to not get her hopes up. She didn't think Mike was lying to her, but it was hard to imagine such good things happening to her.

That's when the thought had occurred to her that if they were all living in the same house together, wouldn't that make Mike her brother? She didn't know really anything about what it meant to have a brother other than that it meant Mike would be part of her family, that didn't seem so bad.

Except Mike's reaction told her otherwise. It took her off guard a little to see his nose crinkle in disgust at her question. Maybe she didn't fully understand what a brother was, or maybe... maybe Mike didn't want to be her family?

She needed to know, so she pushed him for an explanation. Mike seemed to be struggling for words which made her even more intrigued to know why what they had between them was different than brother-sister.

She saw him look away, and sensing the change in his mood Eleven could tell he really wanted to tell her something. But maybe he thought she wouldn't understand, which she might not but she was going to try, so she reminded him of his words to her.

'Friends don't lie.'

It was a phrase that came to be very important to her for several reasons. One, it meant she had friends, something she had never had before, and two, people had lied to her pretty much her whole life, especially Papa. So, Mike's honesty was one of the things she liked most about him.

Mike had met her eyes then and she could tell that what he was trying to tell her was really important to him, so she was determined to make herself understand.

He had begun talking about a Snowball, and through her follow up questions she was able to surmise that it was something that a lot of the kids at his school went to in pairs who liked each other. She liked Mike a lot, and Mike had asked her to go with him, so he must like her too. Well, if Mike wanted to go with her and she was his friend then she inferred that it must be something you went to with a friend.

But that wasn't it because Mike struggled for words again, looking anywhere but at her. She could feel nervous energy coming off him in waves. Then those dark eyes fell to hers. Without warning, Mike had leaned forward and put his lips on hers. That wasn't something friends did, she knew it.

Her heart began to race and for a second she stopped breathing as Mike pulled away to look at her shyly.

She had never felt anything like that before. It had been quick but there was no denying the spark that had shot through her at the touch. A warm happiness seeped into every part of her and she could feel herself smiling. She understood now. Mike liked her more than a friend. She did too. Dustin and Lucas were her friends, but she liked Mike more than that, like he was the best. She didn't know what to call that, but it didn't matter right now.

Right now, Eleven wanted to have that feeling again, but the sound of cars outside startled both of them. Mike seemed to think it was his sister, so he ran outside.

As she recovered somewhat from her dazed state, the other two boys had come back with the pudding and she tried to act like her lips weren't on fire as she worked on opening one of the cans, anxious to see if this goo you ate with a spoon was as unappealing as it sounded.

"This'll charge your battery right up, I'm telling you," Dustin told her, a happy grin plastered on his face, as if this was the best thing that had happened to him ever.

But she never got the chance to try the pudding because Mike was running back towards them in a panic.

"Guys! Guys!" she heard Mike's voice call from across the room. Immediately her eyes snapped up to see what was wrong, her pulse racing in fear at the look on Mike's face.

"What is it?" Lucas asked, apparently more interested in the pudding than Mike's alarmed state.

"They found us!" Mike told them, his chest heaving as he breathed hard.

Her heart sank into her stomach and her blood turned to ice. She knew who he was talking about. How had the bad men found her here?

There was no time for anything. Now was the time for running. Mike shot forward and grabbed her hand. Even in this panic, Eleven liked the way it felt but there was no time to dwell on it. They ran around the maze-like halls, heading towards the double doors.

"How did they find us?" Lucas hissed.

"I don't know but they knew we were in the gym," Mike shot back, and she felt his hand give hers a comforting squeeze as they made their way down a set of stairs.

"Lando," Dustin said but she still didn't understand the reference.

With a loud bang, the doors were flung open, the bright beams of flashlights pointing at them and the yelling of the bad men coming towards them. All four of them spun around and started sprinting in the opposite direction. In order to run away faster, she and Mike had to separate their hands.

She could hear Mike and Lucas yelling as they tried to escape. Then they came to another hallway and more bad men were waiting for them. Again they all turned and ran back the way they had come but now the bad men seemed to be coming from every direction. There were too many of them. They were going to be caught but Mike urged her to keep running.

Eleven sprinted in front and as she neared the end of a hallway, a blonde woman stood in front of her. Skidding to a halt, Eleven stared at her with wide eyes, watching as she raised a gun to point at them. An angry fire rose in her chest as she remembered who this person was.

This was the woman who had killed that nice man who gave her food and his shirt the first day she ran away from the lab. Eleven knew she would shoot Mike too. Eleven would not let that happen.

Lowering her chin and narrowing her eyes at the woman, she began to gather her remaining energy and focus her thoughts on what she was about to do. Taking a few deep breaths, Eleven imagined their brains being crushed.

It was starting to hurt her head too, but she didn't stop. She couldn't if she wanted to keep Mike and her friends safe. She didn't want to hurt anyone, but she refused to let any harm come to Mike, so she pushed through the pain, hardly aware of her powers causing all of the lights around them to flicker.

Even as the blood began to trickle from their eyes, ears, and noses, Eleven kept extinguishing every single one of their lives. She kept going as their eyes became glassy and the life went out of them, kept going until all at once they fell down, dead.

Only once she was completely sure they were no longer a threat, and Mike was safe, she relaxed her mind and everything went dark.

Mike couldn't comprehend what had just happened. El had somehow killed every single soldier that had been surrounding them. But he didn't have time to process it because he watched in horror as she collapsed to the floor, her head hitting the linoleum with a loud thud. He was next to her in an instant, kneeling beside her limp body.

"El! El? El, are you okay? El!" he called out to her desperately but it was no use. He could barely register anything around him his fear was so all encompassing. She had always woken up after using her powers. His heart thundered loudly in his chest and his breathing came in shallow gasps as he tried to rouse her. She didn't look good; dark circles hung below her eyes.

"Something's wrong," his voice was shaky with fear. Oh, god. What if she has strained herself too much? Could she die from over exhaustion?

"She's just drained," Dustin said, but Mike could register the fear in his voice too.

"No, no, no! She won't wake up!" he contested, unable to get a full breath in his panic. He needed her to be okay. He needed her.

Grabbing her shoulders, Mike shook her more roughly than he normally would, anything to get her to wake up.

"El! El! El!"

Still nothing.

Mike lowered his head to hers, straining his ears to hear if there were any signs of life. Dread overwhelmed him, but then he heard it, the shallowest inhale and a small glimmer of hope filled him.

"She's barely breathing," he said more to himself than the others, as he lifted his head.

"We gotta go!" Lucas insisted, and before Mike had a chance to respond an unfamiliar voice echoed in the hall.

"Leave her!"

They all looked up in unison at the new arrival, craning to see who it was, but Mike already knew, somehow he just knew.

Mike shot to his feet to stand protectively in front of El and he could sense the other two do the same. It was the skinny white-haired man they had seen when the bad men drove up to his house in all of those utility vans. Mike almost didn't notice that he was flanked by two soldiers with guns pointed at them and another man in a suit, because he knew who this bastard was, this was *the* bad man. The worst of all of them. This was the man that hurt El.

"Step away from the child," he ordered them, his oily voice making Mike angrier than he'd ever been in his entire life, a white hot rage was coursing through his veins.

"No! You want her, you have to kill us first!" he challenged with more bravado than he felt, but Mike didn't care. He'd do anything to keep El from being taken back to that awful hellhole with this man. A hellhole where she didn't get to eat chocolate pudding and Eggo's, where she been locked in a dark room as punishment, where she wasn't allowed to even have friends. Mike would die before he let that happen.

"Yeah, that's right!" Dustin stepped up beside him, as did Lucas.

"Eat shit!" his friend roared.

But in their anger they didn't hear the soldiers behind them. By the time they did it was too late, they were caught.

"NO! GET OFF ME!" Mike cried out angrily, as they were pulled backwards and away from El. Mike fought as hard as he could but even in his rage-driven, adrenaline-fueled state, the arms of the soldier behind him didn't budge.

All he could do was watch helplessly as the girl he had shared his first kiss with no more than five minutes ago, was pulled into the arms of this evil man. He took her head in both his hands and whispered to her and Mike felt his stomach clench, struggling even harder to get away.

"Eleven? Eleven, can you hear me? Eleven?"

He could barely hear his words over his racing heart or his screaming, but he could see El rouse just a bit. Mike could see her lips move slightly but her voice was so weak he couldn't discern what she had said, but he thought she said, 'bad man.'

"Yes, it's your Papa," the white-haired man, smiled at her as if he had finally gotten his prize.

But then El looked over to him. The pain and exhaustion were clear in her eyes even from this distance, and he wanted nothing more than to kick that guy's ass and take her away from all of this.

"LET HER GO! LET HER GO, YOU BASTARD!"

El's eyes then looked around in a panic as if she just seemed to realize who was holding her. El whimpered and Mike's heart felt like it was being torn out his chest watching her struggle weakly against the piece of shit that held her firmly in place. Mike felt so utterly helpless as he watched them, wanting to break every bone in this man's body for even touching her.

He and the others kept struggling but stopped their screaming, straining their ears to hear what the man was saying.

"Shh, you're sick, but I'm going to make you better. I'm going to take you back home where I can make you well again, where we can make all of this better, so no one else gets hurt."

A wave of nausea swept over him at this man's words. There was a reason El had run away from him and the lab, there was a reason she was terrified of closed doors and small spaces, a reason she thought she was the monster. They were all wrong. El wasn't the monster, neither was the Demogorgon really. No, it was this man right here.

El seemed to be more alert now and Mike could see her staring back at the man who held her, as she said, "Bad...bad."

Mike felt like crying, as he watched hopelessly until El turned her face to look at him once more. This time, even in her weakened state, she seemed to be filled with resolve, as she held her right hand out to

him and called his name in a strangled voice,

"Mike...Mike...Mike."

He needed to get to her. Pain coursed through him as he watched her try to push the man's hands off of her but, just like him, she was too weak to break free.

All of sudden, the lights began to flicker, at first he thought it might be El but there was no way, she was too drained. Mike's heart sunk as realization dawned on him...

"Blood," he said.

"What?" Lucas panicked voice asked.

"Blood," he repeated, and then they could hear it. The wall behind the soldiers began to crack and the beast started to break through, releasing a high-pitched wail.

"Demogorgon," Dustin confirmed, his face slack with terror.

The soldiers immediately released them to raise their weapons to it, so they wasted no time. Working as a team they rushed to pick El up off the floor, Dustin was the strongest, so he carried her, while Mike and Lucas led the way, running as fast as they could. Away from the monsters.

Eleven could feel herself going in and out of consciousness as Dustin carried her through the halls. The lights were flashing with the surge of electricity from the Upside Down and she could hear the loud bangs from the soldier's guns.

Dustin kept telling her they were almost there but all she wanted was Mike. Eventually, she felt her back come into contact with something hard as she was laid down; she realized that she must be on a table because she was lower than eye level from the boys but definitely not at their feet.

Her vision swam but she felt the warm, reassuring hands of Mike holding both of hers, and she forced her eyes to focus so she could

see him even as the lights went in and out.

"Just hold on a little longer, okay?" he told her, and she could tell he was trying to stay calm for her. "He's gone. The bad man's gone."

Eleven refused to let herself pass out again. She had never felt this drained before, and she thought that this must be what dying felt like. It was worth it though to save Mike. She entwined their fingers and tried to enjoy these last moments with him, her face scrunching up in pain as she listened to Mike speak,

"We'll be home soon. And my mom... she'll get you your own bed and you can eat as many Eggo's as you want... and we can go to the Snow Ball."

She could feel the tears threatening to spill over her drooping eyelids. Mike's vision was so beautiful and so perfect that she could hardly imagine it... and yet, it left her in agony because she *could* imagine it now that she had spent a week with Mike.

Before, in the lab she never could have dreamed she would meet someone like him; so smart and loyal and honest and brave and kind, someone who didn't want to use her for her powers, someone who just wanted to protect her and make her feel better and take her to the Snow Ball.

Her face crumpled as she asked, "Promise?"

In her heart she knew all of these beautiful dreams weren't meant for someone like her.

And yet, Mike made her want to believe it was possible.

"Promise," he swore, never looking away from her, his dark eyes scared but sincere. In that moment, she felt like if she was going to die, she wished he would put his lips on hers again like he did earlier, just one more time.

At that moment, the sound of the Demogorgon and gun shots could be heard just outside the door, and Mike jumped back to look.

She could just see the flashing lights from the bad men's guns and

then a loud crash. Even in her semi-consciousness, she could see there at the door was the Demogorgon.

The boys could have run. She would have preferred it that way because then Mike would have been safe, but they stayed. Lucas scrambled to shoot rocks at it, all three of them panicking, but if the soldier's bullets didn't harm it then these rocks certainly wouldn't.

They were all screaming in terror, doing their best to fight the monster, but Eleven already knew what she had to do. She had already come to terms with the fact she wasn't walking out of this room alive.

Mustering up every last ounce of energy she had left in her weakened body, Eleven stood up from the table. The Demogorgon was dangerously close to her friends and Mike, and as Lucas let off one last shot, Eleven threw the monster across the room and into the wall.

Wordlessly, she strode past the boys and Mike, who in his stupor, didn't stop her from passing. She could already feel trickling from her nose and ears as she strode forward, ready to do what was necessary so that way Mike could live his life, safe and happy, like he was before he found her.

"Eleven! Stop!" she heard Mike shout when she was halfway to the Demogorgon and she could feel him coming towards her. She couldn't risk him getting hurt if her power drained before she took out the Demogorgon. She needed him as far away from the monster as possible. So, she did something she wouldn't have done in any other circumstance: she used her powers to fling him backwards until he slid back against the furthest wall.

She hadn't thrown him nearly as hard as she had with Lucas the time he and Mike were fighting, but she hated to have to do it. But she knew an alive Mike with a bruise was better than a dead Mike. She just hoped he would forgive her after she was gone.

Continuing her forward trek towards the monsters, Eleven stared it down unfeelingly as she crushed it harder against the wall, deaf to its screams of pain. When she was mere feet from it, she paused to look

back at Mike one last time.

Even from across the room, she could see the tears streaming down his face, his dark eyes feeling as if they were tearing her in two, knowing she was destroying the beautiful perfect future he had planned for them. But he would be alive to live it with someone else, and that was what gave her the strength to do this.

"Goodbye, Mike," she said to him, her voice thick with emotion, but her eyes lingered. The pain in his eyes was almost enough for her to turn around and try to run away with them, anything but leave the boy who had shown her how to be less like Eleven, the number, and more like, El, the girl who had friends and ate Eggo's and helped people.

Forcing herself to look away from Mike, she glared at the monster and growled, "No more," before holding her hand out and channeling every bit of power she had left into ripping this monster apart for good.

And that's what she did.

She watched as it disintegrated into a million tiny pieces pulling her away from the light and into the darkness.

'Goodbye, Mike.'

Those words and the soul-crushing sound of her last scream were ringing in his ears long after she was gone.

The pain was unlike anything Mike had every experienced. It was the feeling of his entire heart being ripped from his chest and shredded into a million tiny pieces, just as the Demogorgon had been. He couldn't breathe, he couldn't think, he was nowhere near able to process what he had just witnessed. But one thought kept repeating on a loop,

She's gone. El is gone.

Mike thought it would probably hurt less to be ripped apart by the Demogorgon's razor-sharp teeth than to feel the agony of losing El.

He just couldn't accept it.

But he had watched her disappear before his very eyes. One second she was looking back at him with her sorrowful brown eyes, the next she had disappeared with the Demogorgon. Particles of the monster drifted to the floor like ashes from a fire, but there was no sign of El.

"El! EL!" he screamed as he pushed himself onto his feet, his voice breaking as tears streamed down his face, "EL! EL, WHERE ARE YOU?! ELEVEN! EL!"

But El was gone. She was really gone.

In the aftermath, Mike was in a daze. He was vaguely aware of Dustin and Lucas leading him out of the school, EMT's pulling him to an ambulance to check him for injuries. They put a blanket around his shoulders, but it did nothing to warm him up. All he felt was cold and numb.

He didn't even hear his mom shouting his name until she had pulled him out of the back of the ambulance and into her arms. A fresh wave of pain seared through his chest, and Mike was certain he had no tears left but more spilled down his cheeks. He didn't even have it in him to hug her back, so he just stood here, letting her hold him tightly to her.

She didn't ask any questions. He wasn't sure he'd even be able to answer them if she had. Instead, she and his dad offered to take him home, which prompted him to speak for the first time since she had gone.

"No... I want to see Will."

And that was it. They didn't try to argue, they just looked at each other worriedly and took him to the hospital. Everybody was there; Mrs. Byers, Jonathan, the Chief, Dad, Steve, Mom, Nancy, Dustin, Lucas, and.... *El* is what he wanted to say. A fresh wave of pain crashing over him. Well it was almost everybody.

After what must have been hours, Jonathan finally came and told

them they could come back and see Will. He finally felt something again. He was excited to see his friend after so long, and seeing Will would remind him that everything had been real, El hadn't just been a girl he had imagined.

They rushed to Will's bedside, Mike leading the way. It really was good to see Will.

"Byers!" Lucas shouted happily from behind him as he and Lucas leaned down to give Will a hug before Dustin pulled them back to give Will his own bear hug.

Mike was somewhat aware of Jonathan and Mrs. Byers telling them to take it easy on Will, but they had so much to tell him. He had missed so much.

"You won't believe what happened while you were gone, man!"

"It was mental!"

"You had a funeral!"

"Jennifer Hayes was crying!"

"And Troy peed himself!"

"In front of the whole school!"

Will broke into a coughing fit as their excitement got him riled up. Their mood darkened somewhat remembering the seriousness of what had happened to their friend.

"You okay?" Mike asked, giving Will's shoulder a gentle push.

"It got me. The Demogorgon," Will admitted.

"We know. It's okay. It's dead," Mike began and then decided to tell him about El. "We made a new friend... she stopped it, she saved us...but she's gone now," Mike spoke, his throat beginning to tighten just thinking about El again. After that, the three of them began telling El's story and how she had saved not just Will, but all of them. It was a fresh wound that made it hard to talk about her, but he also

needed to talk about her. If he didn't then she really would be gone.

And then things slowly went back to normal, well as normal as they could. But something had fundamentally changed inside of Mike. Nothing would ever be normal again. El had meant something to him. Not just something, everything. How was he supposed to pick up where he left off, as if she had never existed? He couldn't. That's how.

The people from the lab had come to his house that first night after she had gone, demanding to know where she was. Even if he did know where she was, he'd never tell them, that's what he had said to them. But as he looked out the window while they spoke to him, he could have sworn... no. It couldn't be.

Yet, Mike couldn't stop the nagging feeling that El was out there somewhere, alive. Maybe she was stuck in the Upside Down like Will had been and couldn't get back. So, as tired as he was that first night without her, he stayed up and painstakingly put her fort back together the way it had been before she left. Mike sat down just inside it, like she had used to, he pulled out the antenna on his Supercomm, and looked down at the radio for a moment. He flicked on the power button, and his eyes fell on the channel dial. He knew he was being dumb but maybe, just maybe...

Mike switched the Supercomm to channel eleven, and held it up to his face,

"Hello, El? Are you there? It's day 1...."

A/N: And that's it, folks! I hope you all enjoyed this little retelling of Season 1! I am in the process of writing Season 2 but like this one I won't be posting any chapters until I have the whole thing written. So, that way you all won't have to wait too long between updates. Season 2 will be a little different because obviously there is limited actual Mike and Eleven interaction, so I will be doing a lot of the filling in myself. So, look for that soon! You guys are all so amazing. Thank you so much for reading!

9. Afterword

Just a head's up folks, the first chapter of the sequel to this story is posted! It's just called Stranger Things 2: The Continuing Story of Mike and Eleven. If you're interested, head over there and read it and let me know what you think! The chapters will be significantly shorter than the ones in the story in the beginning but will drastically increase in length when Mike and Eleven are reunited. There will be A LOT of extra scenes added between Mike and Eleven, particularly during that 'One Month Later' bit. So, if it starts out slow that's why! Please, please, please let me know if you like it! And thank you all so much for your support of this story!